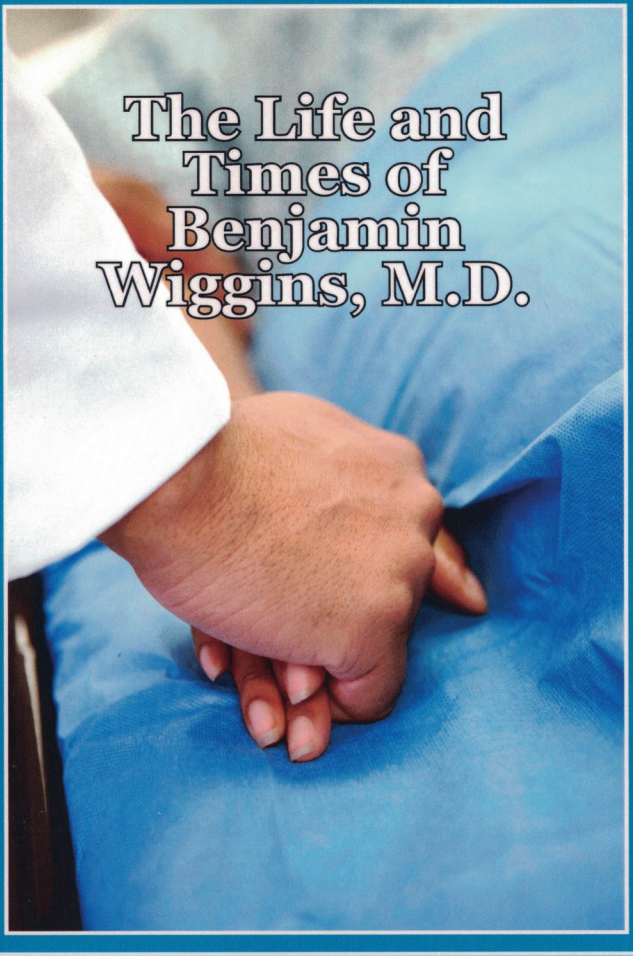
The Life and Times of Benjamin Wiggins, M.D.



Raymond C. Andrews, M.D.

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The Life and Times of Benjamin Wiggins, M.D.

A Novel

Books by Raymond C. Andrews, M.D.

Medical Grail Revised
How to Be a Patient and Live to Tell the Tale!
Driving the Great Western Trail in Arizona
Arizona's East-West Trail: A Backcountry Adventure
The Mysterious Doctor Sciamano and Other Strange Tales

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The Great Western Trail in Arizona

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For Ben who never was.

I

The blood dripping from the face of the twelve-year-old boy would stain his carpet, but Benjamin Wiggins was a doctor, and clean carpets were not a priority. When he entered his examining room and saw lovely Evelyn Cooper standing in front of his examining table, her tattered skirt askew and her blouse ripped at the shoulder, his heart did something. He was not sure what.

Long, reddish-blond hair framed the young woman’s sorrowful oval face whose soft features usually radiated excitement. Today, however, she nervously chewed her lower lip, her downcast brown eyes having lost their sparkle. Her bruised arms were wrapped tightly around her young son who was trying in vain to hide his tears as Ben approached.

"You'll be okay, Ronald," she whispered into his ear as she released him and stepped aside. Ben lifted the boy onto his examining table and gently tilted his head backward to find the source of the bleeding. He thought it odd the way the kid had been standing in his mother's arms, head down ashamedly, as though he had done something terribly wrong. Poor kid.

"Is this Jack's work?" he asked as he gently examined the boy's face. *Eyes OK, mouth and teeth OK. Nose is so shattered I'll never be able to make it perfectly straight again.*

"Yes," Evelyn sighed. "It is."

Ben had treated the young woman's welts and bruises many times before today, he had even put a cast on her broken elbow after she alleged she had fallen off a ladder while trimming a tree in her yard. He was certain she was a victim of spousal abuse, but he could do nothing to help her since she had refused to tell him the truth about her injuries.

Evelyn was an adult and could keep her private life a secret, even if it killed her. But this boy, this kid with a bloodied face, was the limit. This time Ben could not ignore the fact that his own father – a notorious drunk – was beating his child.

"I need to put your nose back in place, Ronald. It'll hurt," he warned, "but only for a minute."

The boy pulled away from Ben's hand.

"Let the doctor fix your nose, honey. He'll give you a painkiller," his mother assured him, resting her hand on his leg. The boy settled down at her touch.

James! His own son's name flew into his mind whenever Ben heard the word "painkiller" since he had died of an overdose of them. Ben felt dizzy for an instant, then busied himself with the anesthetic.

"This will sting," Ben said, "but it'll be over

before you know it." He injected the anesthetic into Ronald's nose and then reduced the fracture as best he could.

"Where's Jack now?" he asked, as he packed the nose with gauze.

"In a bar somewhere," Evelyn shrugged. "He fights with everyone when he's drunk, and he's drunk all the time."

"Considering his small stature, you'd think he'd tire of getting beaten up so often."

"Ha, sure." Evelyn corrected, in a soft monotone. "He hasn't met the guy who can beat him, drunk or sober. He's incredibly strong. Even when he's drunk, he can lift a barrel of oil a foot off the ground."

"Does he still work for Whitney Grapes?" Ben asked as he helped Ronald off the table. The boy leaned against his mother and gingerly touched his bandaged nose.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "That job lasted only three days. It beat his four day job in Grinnell."

Ben went to his desk and opened the boy's chart.

"How do you survive if he doesn't work?" he asked without looking up.

"I do odd jobs, sewing and such, and we're on unemployment," she said, her cheeks reddening. It humiliated her to have to admit she depended upon the state for survival because her husband could not keep a job.

Ben nodded and stood from his desk after jotting a few words on Ronald's record,. "Your

turn now," he said to Evelyn. "Up on the table so I can have a look at you."

"Go to the waiting room, son. I'll be along in a minute," she ordered. Ronald quietly left the room.

She sat on the table and tried to cover her shoulder with her torn blouse, but Ben pulled it back and looked at her bruised skin. A red cigar burn and a large black and blue on her upper chest overlapped others that had not completely faded.

"Evelyn," he said, "this is the last time Jack will touch you. You think you're responsible for the beatings he gives you and Ronald, but you're not. You're psychologically dependent upon him in an unhealthy way, something we call ‘codependency.’ I understand your fears, but I have to tell the authorities about this."

"Please don't," the woman pleaded, her eyes wide with fright. "He'll kill me if he thinks I told on him."

Ben could hear the terror in her voice. "He's not going to kill anyone outside prison," he replied soothingly, as he examined her elbow. "How’s your arm?"

"It's OK. I can't straighten it completely, but I can use it right enough."

"I never believed your story that you fell off a ladder," he said as palpated her elbow. Evelyn grimaced when he tried to straighten it.

"You need physical therapy for your elbow before it freezes in that position,” he said. “So

confess. Did Jack use a bat or an iron to break it?"

"A tire iron," she replied. She pulled back when Ben touched her shoulder.

"Besides your shoulder, do you hurt anywhere else?" he asked. He gently walked his fingers over the bones of her chest and back, searching for painful spots that could indicate fractures.

"No. This time he just tore my clothes. He was so drunk he could barely stand. I grabbed Ronald and ran before he did any real damage."

"Evelyn," Ben replied, shaking his head, "a broken nose *is* real damage. You're so beaten down mentally you don't even realize it."

The woman burst into tears and rested her head on his shoulder. He held her until the spasms ended and then went to his desk and called the county sheriff.

"It's a coincidence you should be calling, Doc," he said. "Jack is trashing a bar on the west side of town at this moment. Two of my men are trying to arrest him, but I might have to send out a few more. He's putting up a heck of a fight."

"Let me know when he's in jail, Phil. I need to file a complaint against him."

"I'll call you as soon as I hear something."

"Thanks," Ben replied. He hung up the phone and took a couple of safety pins from a desk drawer before returning to Evelyn. "The sheriff's men are arresting your husband now.

You'll need a safe place to stay if they lock him up for as long as I think they should," he said, as he pinned together her torn blouse.

"Do you have friends or relatives that could take you in?"

"No one," she said, shaking her head. The phone rang as Ben snapped the last pin. He returned to his desk and picked up the receiver.

"We got him," the sheriff said, "but it took a squad. Apart from drunk and disorderly conduct, resisting arrest, creating a public nuisance, and damaging private property, is there anything else we can add?"

"Child and spousal abuse," Ben replied, looking at Evelyn. "Repeated spousal abuse, assault with a deadly weapon, and three counts of being intensely disliked by me."

"I think we have enough on him to put him away for a long time without that last charge," the sheriff laughed.

Ben dropped the receiver into its cradle. "Jack's in jail," he announced, “and he will be for a while. Since your landlord isn't going to let you live in his house rent free, you'll need a place to stay until you can afford one of your own. You and Ronald will stay in my guesthouse until I find you a job and a home."

"But I can't afford––"

"Hush!" he ordered, holding up his hand. "Did you graduate high school?"

"No," she replied, reddening again.

"So you'll return to school, and then we'll

find you a job. Is there anything you'd like to do?"

"I'd like to be a nurse," she said. Her face brightened at the idea. "Do you think I can?"

"Evelyn, you can do anything you set your mind to," he replied. "Do you need anything for pain?"

"No. Aspirin will do," she answered.

"Good. Take a seat in the waiting room while I talk with my secretary. She'll arrange your move and will help you until you're settled."

"Dr. Wiggins, I––" Evelyn said as tears came to her eyes.

Ben put a finger to his lips. "Just see that Ronald grows up to be a better man than his father, and work on that dream of becoming a nurse. Do that, and you'll have repaid me tenfold."

Evelyn gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and wiped her tears before she left the office.

Ben's heart skipped a beat.

II

In 2006 Benjamin Wiggins was seventy-nine years old, arthritic, and bald. Evelyn Cooper, twenty years his junior, had graduated valedictorian from nursing school and was the supervisor at Whitney Community Hospital. For twenty-seven years, the physician and nurse had provided outstanding health care to a poor population of migrant farm workers in a dying town in Arizona's Sonoran Desert.

Their hospital, a squat seventy-five-year-old building with myriad cracks zigzagging across its stuccoed exterior like primitive graffiti, still had many of its original furnishings, and, unfortunately, some of its original medical and surgical equipment. It was a time capsule of frontier medicine.

"I need to swap my hip for a new one, Ev," Ben said one evening as they sat at a table in a quiet corner of an Italian restaurant in the heart of Phoenix. A young waiter, his stiff leather apron strapped over his starched white shirt and baggy black pants, interrupted his lament.

“The usual, Dottore?” he asked with an accent from somewhere deep in Italy’s boot. “Tagliatelle con ragù alla bolognese?” Ben nodded. The waiter jotted the order on his pad, and disappeared as quickly as he had appeared.

"As I was saying,” Ben continued, “my hip pain is becoming quite annoying. Sitting in a tub of hot water for thirty minutes used to relieve it, now all it does is wrinkle my skin more than it already is."

"I may be cynical,” Evelyn said, a tender smile playing on her lips, “but if your hip didn't slow you down, I'd never be able to keep up with you."

"Your compassion for the sick and suffering has made you the outstanding nurse you are." He chuckled and patted her hand. "And these?" he lamented, extending his crooked fingers over the candle in the center of the table. "How am I supposed to perform surgery with a hand whose joints have been replaced by cement? I can't even build my model ships anymore.

"We should share the symptoms of old age equally among the young and old,” he said after a moment. “It would be better for everyone."

"Maybe not for everyone,” Evelyn said with a laugh, “the young might object to that idea. And besides, how could I take care of you if I'm old myself?" she wondered.

"Hum. You have a point," Ben agreed,

nodding repeatedly.

The waiter returned and placed their food in front of them. “Parmigiano?” he asked. Ben nodded and the young man grated cheese onto his and Evelyn’s tagliatelle, bowed slightly, and left.

"I shouldn't complain," he continued as he mixed the cheese into the pasta. "I've lived a long, happy life, and my years with you have been especially wonderful."

"I love you too, Ben. So why don't we retire and let me move in with you. You need someone to keep your mansion organized."

He rested his fork on his plate and looked over to Evelyn. "I’ve told you repeatedly that my home is spacious, not extravagant,” he corrected, playfully shaking a gnarly finger at her. “The only mansion in this backward town is Grimes's rambling Tudor mansion. And we agreed you can't move in until we're married. If it was good enough for William Randolph Hearst, it's good enough for me."

"I never agreed to that, and if what were good enough for Hearst? Marion lived with him for years, they weren't married, and they didn’t spend their nights just playing chess," she bantered.

"You're right," he chuckled. His hand shook as he picked up his fork and wound a few tagliatelle on its tines. "Well then, it's almost as good for me," he said as he tasted the noodles.

"Umm, good stuff,” he said, brushing a

napkin over the spot of sauce he had just added to his pants.

“Besides, if I retire, who'll care for my patients?" he wondered. "I don't have many left, but most are old and frail. Many of them have been with me for their entire lives. There's no one in this town I can trust to care for them without killing them."

Evelyn dipped her fork into the ragù and brought it to her lips. "This sauce is great too!" she said, licking them clean with her tongue. "I need to get the recipe. I hear it takes a day to make. How about sending your patients to Dan Cunningham?"

"He's retiring soon."

"Then put an advertisement in a medical journal. You might find some eager young doctor who would love to practice medicine in a small town."

"I wouldn't wish Whitney on anyone," Ben replied, his eyes narrowed in thought. "I'll just struggle on until you retire, or until my hip puts me to bed. Maybe by then someone will come along.

"And what should I do with the scrapbook of newspaper clippings Eric left me when he died?” he added as an afterthought. “He insisted I pass it on, but to whom? Not to Grimes, nor to Nevins, nor to Thompson."

"Burn it," Evelyn said, digging into her plate. "Just burn it."

The next day Ben was limping around

George Cohen's "square doughnut," as the administrator referred to his hospital's architecture, when an X-ray technician stopped him in the hallway.

"Were you at the District Board’s meeting last night?" she asked. Ben had delivered the homely, brown-skinned, overweight woman twenty-two years ago, and now she had four children of her own, each by a different father.

"What meeting?" Ben wondered.

"We're getting a CT scanner."

"Where’s the money coming from?"

"Our tax dollars. Dr. Compton says we need it."

Ben was stymied. The small hospital in the arid desert west of Phoenix needed many things, but a million dollar scanner was not one of them.

Damn them! If it's not one scam, it's another. I'll bet Eric is already banging on the inside of the lid of his coffin.

"Thanks for the information," Ben said before limping, almost skipping on his bad leg, to Evelyn's office to tell her the news.

She looked up from the ledger she was annotating when he knocked on her door and entered her small, but very tidy and well-organized office.

“Yes, dear, what brings you here today?" she asked cheerfully, looking up at him.

"Did you hear about the scanner?"

"I heard rumors," she replied evasively, returning to her ledger.

"Compton wants to buy it with our tax money. This is a scam, and I can't allow it."

"Aren't you retiring sometime soon?" Evelyn asked distractedly. She tapped her finger on a line in the ledger. "Here you are, you bugger," she said, stopping in the middle of a row of numbers.

"Not yet," he replied. She tilted her head in a way he always found maddening, since it was what she did when she did not believe a word he said.

"Harrumph," he said. "I'll be at your house for dinner at eight. Meanwhile get a copy of the minutes of last night's meeting. I need to do a little snooping."

"Ben, don't––" Evelyn pleaded, but he had already left her office and was limping down the hall toward Joe Thompson, who was scanning the announcements on the small bulletin board outside the administrator’s office.

"Joe," he called, "got a minute?" Thompson, a fifty-nine-year-old morbidly obese surgeon with a gigantic head and hands and feet to match, was born and raised in Whitney. Ben had cured his ailments since his teenage years, and had watched him grow from a handsome and enigmatic lad who enjoyed ripping the wings off flies, to an amorphous creature who used and discarded anyone foolish enough to trust him.

Thompson's right earlobe was tucked up into itself, as was his grandfather’s, and he

tugged at it absentmindedly whenever he was lying.

"Barely," Joe said, turning from the bulletin board. "I'm late for surgery."

"Are you involved in the CT scanner project?"

"No," he replied. He brushed his meaty hand over the sparse gray hair above his ear, but did not stop to tug its misshapen lobe. "Art thinks we need it, and he wants the Board to pay for it."

"What do you think about the idea?" Ben asked.

"Probably the same as you. Our forty-five bed, five patients a day census can't afford it."

Ben nodded. "This place would close if it weren't for state subsidies, local taxes, and the few patients you and Nevins toss Cohen's way," he said.

"Even then he complains that it's tough to stay afloat," Joe agreed. "I live in Phoenix, and I can operate there if this dump closes, but the thought terrifies me. Too much competition."

"Life is full of problems…. Who else besides Compton is in this group?"

"I don't know. See ya 'round," he said as he waddled down the hallway toward the surgical suite.

That evening Ben unlocked Evelyn's front door with his key and limped to the kitchen. She flung a hand up in silent greeting while adding Worcester sauce to the beef, garlic,

onion, and cabbage simmering in a skillet on the stove.

"Mm, runzas. I love them," he said, sniffing the air. "Can't give up your Iowan heritage, eh?"

"They're all I could scrape together on short notice." She added beef broth and mustard to the mix, then lowered the flame under the skillet.

"Where's Ronald?"

"In Europe on a photo shoot. His girlfriend stayed home to babysit their dogs," she replied, eyeing him obliquely to observe his reaction.

Ben massaged his arthritic knuckles. "Forget the hints. I know they live together even though they're not married. You aren't getting any ideas again, are you?"

"Nope. I know we can't live together until we're married, and we can't marry until Jack gives me a divorce or he abandons his earthly ties. Since my religion doesn't allow divorce, I have to wait until he dies.

“It just seems a waste of precious time though.”

Ben nodded thoughtfully. "Could be. Life usually leaves space for regrets at the end of it. Where is he now?"

"Dunno,” she shrugged. “I hear he’s living in a shack somewhere near Flagstaff. Ronald still speaks to him. I don't."

"It's odd to think he would, after he broke his nose."

“He’s OK when his breathalyzer is negative,” Evelyn replied, absentmindedly massaging the scar on her chest where Jack had burned her with a cigar. "I feel sorry for him," she said after a few minutes. "He did love us once."

"I know he did," Ben said. "When Ronald was an infant, Jack was so protective, he wouldn't let me put my stethoscope on his chest until I had warmed it to body temperature."

Evelyn laughed loudly, showing two slightly crooked front teeth. She always covered her mouth when laughing, but never when she was with Ben. "You had to put it on his cheek first so he could be sure it was warm enough.

"We had a nice marriage until he returned from one of America’s Forever Wars. It changed him. He went in a Marine, but came out a depressed, maybe even suicidal, wreck of a man. He was young and impressionable, eager to fight for what he believed was right when he entered Vietnam, but that didn’t last long,” she said. She pressed her lips into a thin line, saddened by memories she had hoped would never return to haunt her.

“Initially his letters were full of optimism,” she continued after a few moments, “but within six months he was writing about the senseless murder of civilians and the wanton destruction of property our jets were causing." She slowly stirred the savory runza filling,

nodding at something only she could see.

"He was devastated when everyone in his company died in a firefight, and never forgave himself for being the sole survivor. After he returned home, he drank to forget until he forgot why he drank. That's when he became violent.

"The doctors called it post-traumatic stress disorder. PTSD! After he got through beating on us," she scowled angrily, thumping the burn on her chest with a finger, "I," she continued with fire in her eyes, "*I* had it *worse* than he did."

Ben laughed, then quickly apologized. "PTSD is not funny, "I'm sorry," he said. "But the way you said it was." He walked over and hugged her.

"Do you ever think about him?"

She shook her head, then rested it on his shoulder. She could smell his after shave lotion, which calmed her. Since it often elicited the opposite effect, Ben usually kept two or three bottles of it on a shelf in his bathroom.

"No," she said, pulling away from him. "He was part of my past life and will never again be part of this one. But I still think living together would be more convenient for both of us."

"Broken record. I have to admire your determination, but nope, I can't do it," Ben protested, tapping her nose with a bent finger. He limped over to the table and leaned against

it. "But I still want you out of this part of town. There's a house near mine I'll buy for you. You can live in it until we get married. I can get someone to dig a tunnel to connect our houses. It’s a cottage industry in Mexico, so if I put the word out among a certain group of my patients…."

Evenly flung up her hands, unsure if she was more exasperated by his resistance to their living together or by his absurd alternatives to cohabitation.

"No thanks, I'm fine here," she said.

"You were fine here in the seventies. Then the only beatings in the neighborhood were the ones women gave their threadbare carpets. It changed after the gangs and drug pushers moved in."

"Don't forget to mention the drop houses with the Mexican illegals..." Evelyn dispassionately continued Ben’s litany of the dangers she theoretically faced every day in her area of town. She had heard them a million times. "...and the warriors with long ponytails and mysterious tattoos. I told you, the secret to my survival is the niche with the statue of the Virgin Mary in my front yard.

"Gang members may be killers six days a week, but they go to church on Sundays. They'll never harm me as long as the Virgin is there to protect me."

"But one of them brutally murdered a woman not far from here,” Ben protested. “Cut her up into tiny pieces, thwack thwack," he

said, repeatedly chopping the air with his deformed hand like an arthritic Ninja.

"That was five years ago, Ben, and she wasn't 'cut up into tiny pieces.'"

"So I exaggerate, they were big pieces. But they never found the murderer. He could be living right on this block. Right next to you!"

"I'm still not worried." Evelyn shrugged and returned to her cooking.

"Did you get the minutes of the Board meeting?"

"They're on the table. The secretary scowled when I asked for them. She knew they were for you, and she knows what'll happen next."

"Maybe not this time. Let's see what this is all about first."

Ben picked up the sheet of paper from the far side of the table and skimmed it. "So Compton has convinced the Board to loan him and eleven doctors seven hundred eighty-eight thousand dollars to buy a scanner," he said, summarizing the missive. "He's named only one other member of his group, Marty Nevins, Thompson's partner. And Joe told me he wasn't involved."

"Was he tugging on his earlobe while he said that?"

"No. Almost though, he sorta brushed it with his hand."

"That must mean he's thinking about joining, or has already thought about it and decided against it. I wonder if he knows that

ear tug of his is a snitch?"

"Heaven knows," Ben chortled at the thought. He folded the paper and put it into his shirt pocket. "Do you know who the others are?"

Evelyn shook her head. "Nope, but the way gossip flies in this town, I'll know in a day or two."

"The Board says the scanner will be its own collateral," Ben griped, knitting his eyebrows. "That's rubbish! If our doctors want it, they should pay for it themselves. Find out when the next meeting is."

"I'll check tomorrow," Evelyn replied as she placed two hamburger buns on the meat mixture and covered it.

"I wish you wouldn't fight this. Since you have no friends among the staff, you'll lose, just like you did when you turned in Abe Grimes years ago."

"Perhaps, but I'll go down fighting for what I believe in: good care at a reasonable price for the poor citizens of this town." Evelyn raised a manicured finger and spun it in a circle a few times. *Yada Yada Yada* she thought. She respected Ben's courage and unwavering beliefs, but she had heard them many times before.

Ben tugged at his lower lip and thought about the new situation confronting him and the town, and, after a few minutes, said, "Greed never changes, it only adapts to new situations. The mobile scanner that already

comes to town has enough work for just a few hours a week. The only way Compton and his pals can pay off that loan is by ordering many more scans than they do now, and by overcharging for them too. It's unethical and immoral."

Evelyn filled the steamed buns with the beef and cabbage mixture and brought them to the table. "This deal will fall through," she assured him with a kiss on the cheek, “because the town can’t afford it. I'll fight it with you because I love you, but I'll harp until you walk away from it."

III

One-hundred-twenty-year-old Whitney, Arizona, population 19,523, is an old western town not far from the Mexico border. It had refused for most of its existence to open its doors to the twentieth century. The burned-out houses that lined the exit off Route 85, a dismal memorial to a farm workers' unsuccessful strike for better wages years earlier, discouraged both change and tourism.

Its small historic center, a potholed main street named Main Street by its unimaginative founders, is still flanked by a dozen stores its hard-nosed proprietors refused to relocate to the new commercial area of town. The rare tourist who exited the highway hoping to find an authentic piece of the old west on Main Street, found instead an abandoned playground with rusting slides and broken swings, a town hall that was considered a handsome reproduction of a Greek amphitheater only by its builders and their relatives on the District Board that authorized it, and a few buildings leaning unceremoniously on each for support.

Aside from a rare white-wash that included sections of their windows, the weatherworn buildings are as they were when they were constructed in the late nineteenth century. Most are shuttered today, but a saloon, now a lawyer's office, a small grocery store, a general store, a library, and a funeral parlor, are still open for business. The present owner of the funeral parlor sweeps his covered wooden sidewalk daily in the false hope it will revitalize a business that had its most profitable years when gun fights were a popular way of settling disputes.

Even though it is in its death throws, it is still more popular than the library. Miss Turnbottom, the librarian, a wonderful, hopelessly thin woman in her eighties, refuses to issue library cards to migrants since she firmly believes they would take her books with them to the next lettuce field, or "whatever vegetable they're pulling out of the ground," and never return them. She need not have worried, since the farm workers, most of whom did not speak English, started pulling lettuce or whatever before she rose from her comfortable bed in the morning, and continued until long after she closed her library's doors in the evening.

Big Al's general store stocks clothes, guns, hand tools, and magazines. The covers of the more risque publications he hides under brown wrappers to keep them from children's prying eyes. Although praised as being morally

correct by the town’s spinsters and religious fanatics, this has had no effect on the number of thirteen and fourteen year old girls having babies in the town’s run-down hospital.

On Sunday its citizens flock in their old pick-ups to the modern mall north of the town on Route 85, transforming Whitney into a ghost town. It is Ben's favorite day of the week and he spends it quietly with Evelyn, away from the hospital and its persistent problems. On "their" day he awakens before dawn and thinks of her constantly while shaving, pruning, and slapping aftershave lotion on his face and neck.

At exactly eight o'clock this particular Sunday, Ben knocked on Evelyn's door and she opened it almost immediately. Her hair, once a reddish golden halo that framed her beautiful oval face, was now silver-gray. Years of laughter at Ben’s eye-rolling jokes had etched fine lines and wrinkles around her eyes. But Ben had never noticed the gradual changes from youth into middle age. To him, Evelyn was a timeless ethereal beauty.

"Ready?" he asked, barely able to contain his joy at seeing her. "I made the chicken and potato salad. It'll be the best you've ever tasted."

"Ready," she replied. She glanced over his shoulder, saw his car parked half on the sidewalk, waved a magazine at no one, and sighed.

Holding hands, they walked down the

flagstone path to Ben's old Buick. The torrid Arizona sun had burned the paint off the roof, hood, and trunk of the sixty-year-old car, leaving irregular circles of rusted metal in its wake. Sandstorms had ruthlessly pitted the glass and the remaining paint. A standing joke in town was that the only reason the car was still on the street, was because it had been rejected by the local junk yard.

Ben tugged at the passenger door until it creaked open. The cloth upholstery had torn along one seam ages ago, and Evelyn held it together with one hand as she slid onto the seat. He slammed shut her door and went to the driver's side. He necessarily and ritualistically kicked the bottom of the door twice, hit its handle squarely in its middle, and stepped back. The door would then slowly creak open, as if a spirit from within the vehicle were pushing it. Had there been onlookers, he would have waved his hands mystically over it while saying, “Open Sesame.” But since there were none around, he just crawled unceremoniously into his jalopy and pulled its door shut with both hands.

"When will you buy a new car, Ben?" Evelyn asked as he pushed the key into the ignition.

"Never! This automobile is indestructible," he laughed. "Like me."

Ben turned the key, the motor started, then quickly sputtered. After a few more false

starts and a puff of blue smoke from the tailpipe, the engine reluctantly chugged to life.

"We're off!" he exclaimed as he pulled out in front of a car that was rapidly approaching. The driver leaned on his horn and jammed on his brakes, stopping inches from the old Buick's dented rear bumper. Evelyn buried her head in her magazine, silently thanking the God of the Road for again saving her life.

"Slow down!" Ben yelled as the car pulled up along side him. The driver shook his fist and mouthed a profanity before speeding off.

Thirty minutes, four wrong turns, and five-miles later, Ben parked by the lake in North Park.

"We're here, my love," he said.

"Another miracle," Evelyn replied, breathing a deep sigh of relief. She folded her magazine and tossed it over her shoulder into the back seat. "Why don't you leave the keys in the ignition while we picnic?" she asked. A sardonic smile crept across her lips.

"S-someone could steal my car!" Ben stuttered, scandalized by the thought.

"That's the idea," she laughed.

They walked leisurely around the lake, stopping once to watch a couple of Mexican children chase ducks into the water.

"It's the thirtieth," Evelyn said.

"What's the 'thirtieth'?"

"The next meeting of the District Board, as if you didn't know what I was referring to."

"Oh," he replied with feigned innocence.

"Ben, I don't want you to get involved in this scanner purchase."

"It's wrong!"

"I know, but Compton and Grimes are spearheading it, and you know how they feel about you. It'll get nasty."

Ben stopped and turned toward her. "Grimes is behind this? How do you know? He's a member of the Board. He can't tell it what he wants, and then vote to buy it for himself. It's illegal."

"True, but this is Whitney. Mario Petello is its president, and he's no fan of yours either."

"But, but I--"

"Have you forgotten the hysterectomy episode with Grimes?" Evelyn said gruffly. Her lips thinned into a tight line, and she looked away from him until her anger subsided. It had been one of the more unpleasant episodes they had ever faced together, and the memory of it always infuriated her.

"You lost, Ben," she continued after a long pause, "not because you were wrong, but because that's politics here. How can I make you understand that I don't want to see you suffer the same humiliation now that you did then. You don't deserve it!"

"That was fifteen years ago," he said timidly, with an almost imperceptible shrug of his thin shoulders.

"So your steel-trap of a mind has forgotten what he and the state did to your reputation?"

"No, of course not," he said, shaking his

head. "No, I'll never forget. But we don't need this scanner and we shouldn't have to pay for it even if we did. If Grimes wants it so badly, let him pay for it. He's stolen enough money from his patients over the years to pay for it ten-fold."

"You're right, but let it go, please?" Evelyn asked, resting her hand on his.

"Harrumph," he replied, shrugging his shoulders again. "This is robbery, and I can’t let them get away with it. Let's return to the car – if someone hasn't stolen it," he grinned. "I'm getting hungry."

He massaged his arthritic hip as they silently continued arm-in-arm around the lake.

IV

At 2 a.m. Monday morning, Ben's phone rang. He had tossed and turned on his foam mattress most of the night in a futile attempt to relieve the pain in his hip, and he welcomed the call since it was an excuse to get out of bed and swallow an aspirin from a small bottle in his medicine cabinet.

"Yes," he said into the receiver. He sat on the side of his bed and turned on the light.

"Dr. Wiggins, it's Donna. I need you now," the twenty-six-year-old emergency room nurse pleaded. "Victor is back, and he's in real trouble."

"How bad?" he asked.

"He's almost dead. Someone turned up his oxygen after he arrived here and it shut down his breathing as you always warned would happen. Dr. Hunter intubated him, and we'll be bringing him to the ICU in a few minutes."

"I'll be there," he said, standing slowly and stiffly from his bed.

Twenty minutes later Ben parked in front of the hospital. Despite his best efforts to keep all four wheels of his disintegrating old Buick

on the roadway, its passenger front wheel ended in the small strip of grass between the curb and the sidewalk.

As soon as he entered the emergency department, Donna ran up to him. Her oval face, framed by a cascade of reddish-brown hair, lit up when she saw him. The only flaw in her otherwise perfect countenance was an almost invisible birthmark under the frames of her designer glasses.

"Victor is already in the ICU, Dr. Wiggins," she said. She put her arm through his as they walked to the intensive care unit. "A student nurse turned up the oxygen, but she won't own up to it. I think she’s terrified she’ll get fired."

Ben chuckled. "Is she afraid of me or his wife?"

"Both, but I'm not sure who terrifies her more," she laughed.

Moments later they entered the ICU. Ben walked over to Victor and his wife while Donna stopped at the nursing station to pick up his chart.

"Hello, Mrs. Forest," he said politely. The nurses respectfully stepped back from the bedside at the sound of his voice. "How are you tonight?"

"I'm fine, Dr. Wiggins," the short, overweight woman huffed, brushing a hair from her eyes, "but Victor sure isn't. Just when I'm certain this damn place can't get any worse, it does."

"Don’t be discouraged. The saints protect

the weak and infirm here. It’s almost a full time job for them, but they manage. Victor will be OK ," he said, holding the man’s hand in his. Victor’s fingers were the darkest blue he had ever seen on a body not already deceased. He took the stethoscope from around Donna's neck, plugged its tips into his ears, and placed its bell on Victor’s chest. The bubbling at the base of one lung signaled his fifth infection of the year. Smoking four packs of cigarettes a day for thirty years had left him so short of breath that even shaving himself was a chore. He was wedded to his oxygen tank, and even a brief divorce from it meant certain death.

"I think he'll be OK, Mrs. Forest," Ben said, turning to Victor’s wife. “This doesn’t seem to be any worse than his usual infections, but we’ll know better by the morning, after the antibiotics start doing their job.”

She smiled briefly, twisting the blue, threadbare handkerchief in her chapped hands, just as she had done after Victor survived his first near-death lung infection years earlier. She was convinced it was a good luck charm, and would never enter a hospital without it, especially if it was in Whitney.

"Are you sure, Doctor? Did I wait too long to bring Victor to the ED? I wanted to call the ambulance two days ago, but since he hates this place so much, he refused." No amount of make-up could conceal the puffiness and dark pouches beneath her eyes that testified to the two sleepless days and nights she had cared

for her husband at home before bringing him to the hospital.

"I’m pretty sure the delay didn’t hurt him. Don’t blame yourself for his thickheadedness," he replied with a smile, squeezing her hand,

"Donna?" asked. Looking around for her.

"Right here," she replied from behind him, holding out Victor's chart. He jotted a few words on it and returned it to her.

"I'll be in the on-call room if you need me," he said.

At seven o'clock that morning, he arose and limped to the sink in the corner of the cubicle. He splashed water over his face and then patted it dry with his handkerchief since there were no towels on the rack by the sink.

Ben exited the on-call room and bumped into Abe Grimes in the hallway. The white-haired, perennially tanned doctor in his early seventies, scowled through thin, bloodless lips,"It's wonderful, or should I say, a wonder, to see you can still walk," he sneered.

"And *I* wonder if your wife feels like I do when she sees your face first thing in the morning? I hear you're buying a CT scanner." His stomach cramped to contain his anger, but not his words to express it.

"What's it to you?"

"You know we order only a handful of scans a week. Why invest a million dollars in a machine that will never pay for itself?"

"That's not your business."

"Of course it is, since I work in this dump. Are you paying for it yourselves?"

"That's none of your fucking business either," he growled before continuing on his way.

Oh, but it is, and you know it is.

As his nemesis disappeared down the hallway, Ben pictured his dead son in his bed holding an empty bottle of Grimes's pain pills. That horrible vision would return again that night, especially after just confronting his son's killer, but he shook the thought from his head and returned to the ICU.

Mrs. Forest was sitting by her husband's bedside wringing her blue handkerchief through her fingers when he approached her.

"Will he make it?" she asked, carefully searching Ben's face for a "yes".

He glanced at the monitors above Victor's bed. They were displaying numbers that would have been life threatening for anyone but her husband.

"I believe so," he said, with a gentle smile. "His oxygen level is back up to normal for him, so he's responding to treatment. I'll check on him again tonight."

He patted her hand comfortingly, bid good-by to the staff, and went home to sleep for a few hours.

That afternoon Ben returned to the hospital on Apache Lane to check on Victor. No one knew why the hospital had been built

on that particular street, but he felt it captured the essence of the doctor-patient relationship as it applied to certain of his colleagues. He limped along the path that meandered between mesquite trees and south-pointing compass cacti before entering the decrepit building through its dual glass doors and continued to the ICU. Mrs. Forest was standing at her husband's bedside, caressing his hands in hers.

"Victor is better. I can tell from his eyes. Don't you agree, Dr. Wiggins?" she asked as soon as he approached, hoping he would.

Ben glanced up at the monitors. They would never be more optimistic than they were at that moment.

"I agree, yes, he is," he nodded. He held out his hand, and a nurse placed her stethoscope in it. Since Ben left his in odd places in the hospital, nurses routinely lent him theirs. It was easier than their having to run off to search for his lost instrument.

He listening to Victor's chest, and after a minute, said optimistically, "He doesn’t need this tube in this throat any longer."

He took a pair of scissors from the stand next to the bed, cut the ribbon holding the tube in place, and gently removed it. Victor coughed twice and then began breathing on his own. A nurse put an oxygen mask over his face and set the flow to four liters a minute.

"All done," Ben said, returning the stethoscope to its owner. "A few more days on

antibiotics and he'll be as good as ever."

"Four liters of oxygen, Dr. Wiggins," the nurse offered. "I taped your order on the front of his chart and on the control valve itself." Ben nodded, then turned to Mrs. Forest.

"I'll be back tomorrow, " he said.

"God bless you." She took his hand and lifted it as if to kiss it, but he gently pulled it away.

"She has better things to do." He smiled and then quietly left the room.

Ben and Evelyn had planned to drive to Goodyear, a small town ten miles from Whitney, for dinner, and Ben limped to the cafeteria where they were to meet.

Dan Cunningham, an elderly family practitioner, was drinking coffee at one of the tables in the nearly empty room. Ben joined him.

"Long time no see," he said, pulling a chair from under the table. It screeched as he dragged it along the floor.

"How've you been?"

"Old age sucks," Cunningham grumbled.

"You're just a kid compared to me," Ben laughed. "You don't want to know what awaits you."

"Whatever it is, I won't face it here."

"Retiring already?"

"In six months," Dan replied, "but it's not soon enough. Barb and I intend to travel the world while we still can. Thirty years in

medicine is too much. It used to be fun, but not anymore. I'm tired of the politics, tired of getting mugged when I call on a patient in the bad part of town, tired of insurance companies telling me what to do and how much to charge, and tired of the corruption and incompetence in this desert dump." He sighed before sipping his coffee.

"So you heard about the CT scanner," Ben said.

"Sure. Abe Grimes is looking for partners."

"What do you think about it?"

"Don't be coy with me, Ben Wiggins," he chided, wagging a finger at his colleague. "I've known you too long. You can't bring down Grimes. He's too well-connected."

"But still––"

"And I've heard your pitch before. 'Most new technology is smoke and mirrors, and unscrupulous doctors misuse it to cover their asses or to pay for the Mercedes in the driveway.' Right?"

Ben laughed. "I didn't know I was so predictable. I'm not against technology. Without it we'd still be anesthetizing patients with wine and rectal cigars. Scanners do make it easier to diagnose certain diseases. But Grimes is a member of the Board, and also of the group that wants to use the tax funds he controls to buy himself and his cronies the million dollar toy."

"You should live in Holland," Dan sniggered. "Then everyone could see the

windmills you love to charge. Anyway my friend, good luck. As always, you'll need it."

"Luck is never on my side," Ben lamented. "By the way, how's your niece?"

"Fran?"

"Right."

"She's juggling nursing school and her marriage to Hal Durio, but she's not doing a good job with either. If they have kids, she'll never graduate."

"It'll work out. My office has been quiet these past months, but if she needs a job after she graduates, I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks," he replied. "Someone's looking for you," he added, nodding towards the doorway. Ben turned and grinned ear to ear when he saw Evelyn standing there.

"Bye, Dan," he said, standing from the table. "I'll come to your retirement party, as long as you don't invite Grimes."

He limped to Evelyn and hugged her. "I love you," he whispered in her ear.

"Ben," she protested mildly, "not here."

"Oh, shush!" he replied. "If anyone complains, it'll be out of jealously. Ready to go?"

"Yes, but why not have dinner at my house? I can whip up one of your favorite Mexican dishes. It won't be as good as any your Mexican grandmother made, but it won't kill you."

"So you’re hinting you don’t want to ride in my car?" he asked with a frown.

"I’m not hinting anything. Goodyear is ten miles away and I need to be at my desk at eight o'clock tomorrow morning," Evelyn replied sinisterly. "We should make these long trips when we have a few days off work."

"OK," he agreed, "but I'll drive you home. I don't like you walking in your neighborhood at night."

Ben waved to Dan before he and Evelyn walked to his Buick. The door pounding and kicking ritual was less taxing than usual since he had forgot to close his door after he parked his car a few hours earlier.

Several young Mexicans were conversing twenty feet from Evelyn's house when Ben bounced his jalopy off the curb in front of it. As he exited his Buick, one of them looked at him and then tapped the shoulder of a stocky man with a ponytail and a lightning bolt tattoo snaking up his neck. He turned, motioned to his friends to stay where they were, and then walked towards Ben.

"Ben!" Evelyn shouted when she saw the dark figure approach him, "get back in the car!" Wiggins, ignoring the panicked command, slammed the door behind him.

"May I help you?" he asked the Mexican. He squinted to see his face, but his features were hidden in shadows.

¿"Buenas noches el Dr Wiggins. cómo es usted y Señorita Evelyn esta noche"? the man asked, extending his hand.

¿"Soy fino, cómo es usted"? Ben replied,

clasping it in his own.

"Bueno, y mi madre le da las gracias para guardar su vida".

"Dígala que dije "hola".

"Hago".

The man bowed and returned to his friends. Evelyn jumped from the car and ran to Ben without taking her eyes off the Mexican.

"What was that all about?" she asked, taking arm and pulling him up the path to the front door of her house.

"The next shipment of cocaine will arrive tomorrow," he said, covering a smile with his knobby hand.

"Ben!" she demanded, "Get serious! What did he want?"

"To thank me for taking care of his mother."

"For free, I'll bet."

"Naturally. She’s poor," he answered as they entered the house. "Pedro is a good person. Unfortunately some of his friends aren't."

"You still speak Spanish well."

"My grandmother spoke to me only in Spanish. I was ashamed of her when I was a kid because my friends from white families taunted me about her. She showered me with affection and taught me to believe in myself, but if you're a kid with Spanish blood in your veins, you're trash to some people. It's ironic because in this town the real trash is white and has a medical degree.

"Only when she was dying of cancer did I realize how wonderful she was, and how wrong I was to try to hide my heritage."

The phone was ringing as they entered the house and Evelyn ran to the kitchen to answer it. Ben limped slowly behind her. She said, "OK," and handed the receiver to Ben. "Pedro wants his money up front for the shipment," she laughed.

"Right." He took the receiver and shouted, "Hallo!"

"Ben, it's Peter Henry, your long lost friend, attorney, and investment adviser. Remember me?"

"Sorry, Peter. I forgot to return your call."

"That was a month ago," he scolded. "We need to discuss some matters you keep avoiding. When can you come in?"

"Is tomorrow OK?"

"After two."

"See you then."

"Is anything wrong?" Evelyn asked as Ben hung up the phone.

“No, I’ve just been neglecting a friend.”

“You shouldn’t do that. You don’t have a lot of them,” she chided. She opened the refrigerator and stared inside. "How about bacon and eggs instead of Mexican? The cupboard, so to speak, is bare."

"Anything you cook will be fine. Can I help?"

"Set the table, and please don’t break any more of my dishes," she chided as she placed

strips of bacon in a frying pan and lit the gas under it.

"Have you heard anything more about the scanner?" Ben asked as he arranged the silverware on the straw place mats on the small oval table in front of the window.

"Doctors hush up around me," she shrugged. "You know they don't want me to hear what they're saying about you. The people who will talk to me think it's a good idea."

"It isn't," Ben corrected.

"They say patients won't have to travel to Phoenix to get their scans, and they won't have to wait either. They'll save gas and time." The bacon sizzled and Evelyn turned down the flame under the skillet. She cracked four eggs into a glass bowl and whipped them with a fork.

"That's all true, but a mobile scanner already does what we need. Performing an emergency head scan in this dinky town is malpractice since we don't have a neurosurgeon on staff to treat a head injury. It's better to send the patient directly to Phoenix where he can get immediate lifesaving care, and then be scanned when he's out of danger."

A few minutes later, Evelyn scooped the crisp bacon out of the pan onto paper towels and poured the grease into a cup before whipping the eggs into the skillet.

"Love," she said, shaking her head, "I

understand why you need to fight this, but I still wish you wouldn't."

"Then let’s both of us retire tomorrow. We'll sell everything, go on a cruise and never return to this town."

"That's a nice idea, but I can't quit, even though I’d like to," she replied. "I keep saying we should both retire and that you should let me move in with you, but I need to work a few more years before I can collect my pension."

"You know I have enough money to support us," Ben rebutted. "You don't need to work anymore."

"I know, but I like the independence I get from having my own money," Evelyn explained.

Ben folded the napkins and placed them under the silverware. "Do you feel I control you?" he wondered, looking up at her.

"No, not at all," she answered, turning off the burner. "I just like having my own money so I don't have to ask you for any if I want to buy you a gift."

"I never thought of it that way," he agreed.

Evelyn ladled the eggs onto two dishes, added the bacon, and brought them to the table. She sat across from Ben and placed her napkin in her lap.

"You know I can't forget about this scanner scandal, love, it's against my nature," he said as he dusted pepper over his eggs. "I wish I could."

"Remember what happened the last time

you fought the system?" she asked before tasting hers.

"How could I forget?

"I'm worried you might start drinking––"

"Never!" Ben interrupted, shaking his head. "I made you a promise I will never break."

Evelyn smiled. "And I love you for it," she replied, "but I'm still concerned. You don't handle stress well anymore. Please reconsider."

"Sure. Mind if I sleep over tonight?"

Evelyn rested her fork on her plate. "You know I don't, but you promised to bring over your CPAP machine to control your snoring, which you haven't done. It shakes the house."

Ben laughed. "Always exaggerating. You have earplugs, don't you?"

"Yes, but if your snoring keeps me awake, you'll find yourself on the couch," she conceded.

"Deal," he replied before hurrying through his meal.

V

The next day Ben returned to the hospital to see Victor Forest. His wife was feeding him breakfast when he entered the unit, and she waved excitedly as he approached the bed. Her blue handkerchief lay neatly folded on the food tray.

"Well, folks," Ben said with a smile, looking at the monitors above his bed, "it looks like Victor is ready to fly from this germ hotel."

Monitors still the same: terrible. His time is running out.

"I am," Victor said slowly with a trembling smile. "I could shave this morning."

"He's his old self," his wife beamed. "Thank you so much, Dr. Wiggins, you're a saint."

"I'll tell Evelyn," Ben laughed. "Maybe she'll believe you."

"Can Victor go home today?"

"Yes. The quicker he gets out of here, the better it is for him. Do you have enough supplies? Oxygen and all the rest?"

"We're fine."

"Good. I'll leave a prescription at the desk," he said as he wrote a note on Victor's

chart. “He'll need an antibiotic for a few more days. I'll stop by your house tomorrow to see how he's doing."

"Thank you again," Mrs. Forest said. "Victor would have died long ago if it weren't for you."

Ben smiled, shook hands with the couple and left the room.

On the way out of the hospital he bumped into George Cohen, the hospital's fifty-five year-old administrator, as he was coming out of his office. His calloused, deformed knuckles and flattened nose, stark reminders of his violent teenage years, contrasted with his present subservient character. George followed Grimes's orders, legal or not, immediately and without question.

"Georgina!" Ben exclaimed, "so nice to see you. What's new in this institution of debatable health care?"

"Dr. Wiggins, will you please stop calling me that?" Cohen protested. His nostrils flaring in annoyance.

"It's what you get for trying to fire Evelyn because she ratted on Grimes for ripping wombs out of thirteen-year-olds," Ben admonished, shaking a crooked finger at the man.

"You should have defended her. I let you off easy last time. Try it again, and you and this hospital will regret it."

"The state said Dr. Grimes was innocent," he argued weakly.

"It did, but that speaks more about its incompetence than Grimes's innocence."

George shrugged off the comment. "Whatever you say, Dr, Wiggins, whatever you say."

"You betcha it is. What's your stance on the CT Grimes is trying to shove down the throats of this poor community?"

"I, I don't know much," he said sheepishly, "except he says it's good for WCH."

"Sure, Georgina, sure," Ben mocked. *Disgusting creature.*

"See you at the meeting tomorrow night," Ben said over his shoulder as he continuing on his way to the lobby exit. He had an appointment with Peter Henry in an hour and he needed a hot bath to relieve his hip pain.

Peter Henry's office was on Main Street. During Whitney's salad days it was a saloon where a cowboy could get a drink that would give "rot gut" a good name, and, for a small fee, could establish a brief relationship with a member of the town's Welcome Wagon. It was more recently the site of two drug related shoot-outs, to the great delight of the owner of the funeral parlor next door. Peter kept the entrance's swinging half doors as a vivid reminder of its past.

The lawyer was sitting behind his antique, ornate oak desk when Ben arrived. They shook hands and Ben sat in front of it in a worn captain's chair, another relic from the early

saloon.

"So, Peter," Ben asked, "what's the problem?"

"No problem," he replied, "just updates. You're two hundred thousand dollars richer than you were last year, but we need to decrease your stock holdings." He handed a sheet of paper to his friend.

"Do it," Ben said, handing it back over the desk.

"But you didn’t even look at it," Peter protested.

"I'm worth eight million dollars, thanks to you. I trust your acumen."

"OK," the lawyer said. "Next is your will. You need to decide who gets what."

"Evelyn gets it all, and her son gets a share if we die together."

"That's only a fraction of your estate. What will you do with the rest of it?"

Ben pursed his lips, and after a minute of thought, his eyes lit up. "Why don't we auction off the money?" he asked.

Peter roared. "Auction off money? A brilliant idea!"

Ben chuckled. “I knew you’d like that,” he said. "I'll let you know when I come up with a better solution."

"Good. By the way, I had lunch with Doug Scofield the other day."

"Is he still the lawyer for the District Board?"

"Yes. Dave Olsen will take over when he

retires at the end of the year."

"And…?" Ben wondered. He leaned back and ran a hand over his bald pate.

"They're approving the scanner loan."

"Without a public hearing? And using tax money to fund private enterprise to boot? Isn't this illegal?"

"Ben, I've been your friend for how many years now? Sixty?"

"We grew up together, and unless I got old faster than you did, it's more like seventy."

"You did age faster," he laughed, "but I'm better looking. Please walk away from this."

"Has Ev been talking to you?" he asked, rubbing his chin.

Peter nodded and pursed his lips. "Yes, she has. We're both worried. You're too old to let a group of people, who have already decided what they intend to do and will let no one stand in their way, torture you."

"Peter, do you honestly think I can ignore this outrage?" Ben asked, standing from his chair.

"No, but I told Evelyn I would try to convince you to ignore it."

"The meeting is tomorrow night in the hospital boardroom, if you want to come."

"I'll skip it. I'll be at your side when it goes public."

"Thanks. I'll get back to you about my will," Ben replied. The friends shook hands, and he left the ex-saloon.

VI

The Coronado Hospital District Board met on September 30th in the boardroom of the Whitney Community Hospital to discuss the scanner purchase. It usually met in the town hall to allow the citizenry to participate in the discussion, but Abe Grimes had wanted nothing and nobody to interfere with his scheme to purchase the million dollar unit, and had blocked the announcement of the event in all the usual conveyances. Not even the reporters at the *Times*, experts at sniffing out gossip, knew of the meeting.

The door was closed when Ben arrived at the boardroom at 8:01. He knocked once and pushed it open without waiting for an invitation. Mario Petello, the Board's president, Douglas Scofield, Abe Grimes, and a few others sitting around the large oak table in the center of the room, looked over at him. Art Compton, the radiologist, Joe Thompson and Tom Wells, a young obstetrician, ignored him. The few citizens that had managed to hear of the meeting sat in chairs along the back wall of the room.

"This is a closed meeting," Grimes grumbled when he saw Ben in the doorway.

"You wish, Abe. Shall I call in the mayor to hear if he agrees with you?"

Petello banged his gavel on the table. "I know you two lovebirds have much to say to each other," he said ironically, "but you'll need to continue it in private. This *is* an open meeting, Abe. We're here because we're a small group and it's expensive to heat or cool the big room in the town hall for just a two-hour meeting.

"Dr. Wiggins, welcome," he added, pointing to an empty chair at the end of the table. "Please join us."

Ben sat next to Louise Sacks, a buxom New Yorker who had moved to Whitney a few years earlier, allegedly because her husband had ties to organized crime and had to leave the state or be fitted for cement boots and dumped into the Atlantic Ocean. Since the *Times* had not yet printed her story, locals doubted its veracity.

"Dr. Compton," Petello continued, "Please excuse the interruption. Continue."

"Thank you," he said. The elderly, spectacled radiologist took a sheet of paper from a folder with hands almost as deformed as Ben's. He worked mornings in Whitney and afternoons in Phoenix as a member of a group that serviced hospitals in five cities. His arthritic hands prevented him from performing the intricate studies he once enjoyed, and he

now spent his time performing barium enemas and interpreting routine X-rays.

"Excuse me," Grimes said, standing from the table. "Since I'm an interested buyer, some people," he explained, glowering at Ben, "might think my sitting on the Board during this discussion is a conflict of interest. Therefore I am leaving it until the discussion is over."

Ben snickered. “Leaving town would be even better,” he said. Grimes glowered, but, unusual for him, did not reply.

"Thank you, Dr. Grimes," Petello said as Abe moved to the last empty chair against the wall.

"Our group has doubled in size since our last meeting," Compton continued. "Whitney Imaging Services, or WIS, now consists of twenty-two doctors, with nine more showing interest. In summary at least twenty-two doctors and their spouses will sign a promissory note for eight hundred thousand dollars."

"Thank you, Dr. Compton, we're happy to make your dream a reality. Now," Petello asked as he glanced around the table, "would anyone like to comment?"

Tom Wells raised his hand. "The Board recognizes Dr. Wells," he said.

"Thanks," he replied. "Art, we don't have twenty-two doctors on staff. Who are these people?"

"Some are hospital administrators,"

Compton replied vaguely.

"Administrators? Plural? We have only one, George Cohen. He doesn't count for ten people, so I ask you again– who are these people?"

"I can't disclose their names now."

"Why not? Are they gangsters? When will you tell us who they are? Or will they remain anonymous and run off with our money?"

Compton ignored the question, preferring to busy himself with the pile of papers in front of him. Louise Sacks raised her hand. "Mr. President, I have a question for Mr. Scofield."

"Continue," Petello said.

"Where is this money coming from, exactly?" she asked the lawyer.

"From old tax collections. We haven't raised taxes for several years," he explained.

"Dr. Compton has just said twenty-two, soon to be thirty-one, physician businessmen and their wives, all outstanding members of this community," Sacks continued with a hint of sarcasm, "will sign a promissory note for our money. Do you have their financial statements?"

"No. Their signatures are enough," Scofield replied with a haughty look on his deeply lined face.

"I disagree," Sacks protested. "No reputable lender would accept signatures alone as sufficient collateral for eight hundred thousand dollars. And unless the wives of these 'outstanding' individuals are wealthy in

their own right, they depend on their spouses for support. It's ridiculous to expect them to repay the loan if husbands cannot."

"The district has the legal right to give this money to these people," Scofield replied. "So their signatures are enough for us."

Ben energetically waved his arm. "Dr. Wiggins," Petello said, "I see you're anxious to give your opinion."

"Very astute. Yes I am," Ben replied. "Government statistics show that Whitney's population is not large enough to support a scanner. Since that is the case, WIS could never pay it off, at least not by ethical means. Even if it could, I object to your loaning tax dollars to a private, for profit organization."

"We have studied those statistics," Petello replied. "and we still feel a CT unit is going to help our patients by keeping them in town instead of sending them to Phoenix to get their scans."

"I agree with Dr. Wiggins," Louise Sacks interrupted. "You people," she said, waving an angry finger at each member of the Board in sequence, going around the table and stopping before she reached Ben, "have no right to use our tax dollars to buy this machine."

"Mrs. Sacks," Jeremy Lutz, another member explained, "we're not giving away the money."

"We doctors don't benefit from this machine," Grimes added from his seat. "It benefits our community and the surrounding

area. We are competent to use it, it's a service to the community, and the money is well-spent."

"I have three questions," Wells said, glaring at the old physician. "First, Abe, why are you opening your mouth? Did you already forget the conflict of interest issue? Second, can the people who can't afford the price of the scans still use it? And third, if a different group of doctors comes to the Board with an idea to buy a piece of equipment, will it lend it money too?"

"We would look into any reasonable request," Lutz replied. "We want only the best for our citizens."

"I'd like to open a Dairy Queen," Ben chuckled. "Ice cream is better for our poor kids than the mud pies they eat. My dog will sign a promissory note with his paw." Everyone laughed except Grimes, who mouthed something only those closest to him could hear.

"Dr. Wells's question is a good one," Pietra Scolman said. Even though her husband had retired in disgust as hospital administrator years earlier and had refused to have anything further to do with the institution, she enjoyed the circus and attended all its meetings. "What happens to the people who cannot afford to use the scanner?"

"We're checking with Medicare and other insurance companies to see if there will be problems," Scofield said. "At the moment,

there aren't any."

"You're talking about *insured* patients," Scolman replied. "I'm talking about *uninsured* patients. The people who can barely afford to pay their rent and food bills. And that majority group includes the migrant workers and half of the residents of this town."

"We're still checking," Scofield replied evasively.

"Well, folks," Petello said, looking at his watch. "Time's up. Before we adjourn, are there any further comments?"

"I'd like to again thank the Board for the loan," Compton said.

"Who is in support of the scanner?" Petello asked. All the Board members voted with their hands except Grimes. He did not need to, since Compton's expression of gratitude before the Board even voted its support had made it unnecessary.

The meeting adjourned and, as the other attendees mingled, Ben left for home with Compton’s words buzzing around his head. "I'd like to again thank the Board for the loan," he had said.

Ben knew he had already lost his battle to keep an expensive, unnecessary scanner out of his poor community.

VII

Ben spent the days after the District Board meeting sitting in front of a new computer that sat on his childhood desk, a small oak table whose paint had bubbled in a fire that had destroyed his home and killed his parents years earlier. He had vowed never to refinish it, but in a room elegantly furnished with floor to ceiling cherry-wood bookcases overflowing with old, leather-bound tomes, rolled manuscripts, exotic sculptures, and antique photographs, it was as out of place as a McDonald's hamburger at a state dinner. He made a mental note, as he did every time he sat in front of it, to have it restored.

He was computer illiterate, but with the help of a teenage neighbor who was not, he believed he had collected enough information from the Internet to sabotage the purchase of a scanner the poor community did not need.

A week later, with a folder full of documents under his arm, Ben left for Phoenix to have lunch with Peter Henry. He thought the drive would clean the carbon buildup in his old Buick's Fireball 8 engine, but the car

disagreed, and he had to have it towed twenty miles to a Buick dealership in the city.

After the car was safely in the service bay, he pleaded with the manager to make it new again. The Mexican laughed and told him his name was Jesus, but he could not perform miracles.

"If you want one," he suggested, "bring it to a church. In the meantime I'll try to get it running again."

Ben insisted the man use only original parts to preserve the car's integrity before calling a taxi to drive him to the restaurant.

Peter sat at a table by the window in the crowded oasis three blocks from the courthouse, and waved to Ben when he saw him enter the dining room. Wiggins limped over and sat next to him, placing his folder on the table.

"You're late," Peter complained. "I ordered us a couple of hamburgers since I have to get back to the courtroom."

"I would have been on time, but my car broke down."

"Did you shoot it?"

"Not funny," Ben replied with a fake scowl. "Anyway, the state, other CT service providers, and the newspapers all agree that Whitney does not need it."

"They may agree among themselves, but none of them has a say over what happens in Whitney," Henry replied with a shrug. "Plus I'm too cynical to believe anything I read in

newspapers, especially if a lawyer wrote the article."

A customer loudly complaining about an insect in his soup disrupted their conversation. Ben glanced up to see the restaurant manager hurrying to calm his irate guest. He shrugged, and opened his folder.

"Skepticism goes with old age. Someone said we're getting wiser too, but I forgot who," Ben replied as he pulled several sheets of paper from it.

“I’m not sure if we’re getting wiser. The saying is, I believe, ‘old too soon, smart too late,’” Peter said, watching for Ben’s response from the corner of his eye. There was none.

"A woman at the State of Arizona Health Agency sent me the Health Services Plan on CT use in our county. The numbers show we can't support a scanner."

"That's nice," Peter replied as their food arrived. He discarded the onions from his greasy, expensive, hamburger before smothering it in ketchup. Ben pushed his aside.

"Not hungry?" Peter asked.

"No, I’m not. There is a problem, however," Ben continued. "She told me that because of changes in the law, agencies like WCH no longer need to plan for scanners. The state stopped collecting data on them several years ago, because the old laws encouraged hospitals and doctors to buy mobile scanners.

"But she agreed that Whitney cannot afford

a scanner."

"It can if the doctors don't have to pay for it themselves," Peter said. He wiped a drop of ketchup from his shirt. "That information will hurt your cause."

"Not if I present only half of it at the next meeting."

"Anything else in the folder of yours? Be quick, I have a case to present to Montfort, a tough judge who doesn't tolerate tardiness. It'll be my last appearance before him, since I'll no longer plead cases in court. I'm not accepting new clients either. It's time to wind down."

"Two more documents," Ben continued, oblivious to his friend's comments. "One is from Maricopa Medical Imaging. Their mobile FI CT/2980PP high-resolution scanner already services inpatients and outpatients at WCH. The radiologist says he charges the hospital for the technical portion of examination, and the hospital bills the patient.

"His head and body studies cost from three hundred to three hundred fifty dollars, with a few bucks more for extra slices. Compton and his crew could never match those prices."

"OK, Ben, you've convinced me it's a bad idea. I'll tell Grimes I'm no longer interested in investing in his machine," Peter replied, holding back a laugh.

"Fine friend you are," Ben replied with a wry grin. "One more thing and I'll let you get back to Montecristo."

"Montfort."

"That what I said. This last letter is a gem." He lifted a sheet of cream colored paper from his folder. "It's from the head technician at Freedland Memorial Hospital near Globe. His one hundred eighty bed hospital bought the Sonics International 1200TG two years ago for one point five million. He says it breaks down frequently, and if it does in the afternoon, he can't contact the company until the next day, since it's in Chicago. Different time zone. And he has to replace its twenty thousand dollar X-ray tube every three months.

"His gripe made it into the local papers. I don't know which one since all he sent me was a clipped article, but a reporter asked him about our situation and then called Sonics. Its spokesperson said… he said–-" Ben scanned the article. "Here it is," he said excitedly, pointing to a paragraph in the middle of the page. "He says, 'We have discontinued the model we installed a while ago in Freedland Hospital. Our top unit is the 1200TG SE, one of the most widely accepted in today's marketplace.

"'Our service contract guarantees it will work ninety-five percent of the time, and covers all parts and labor.' He agreed that parts come from Chicago."

"That it?" Peter asked, looking at his watch. "I have to run."

"Is what the Board is doing legal?"

"Maybe."

"How can I stop the purchase?"

"You can't," Peter said with a deep sigh. "Ben, they do not care about your statistics. They have already created the facts they need to convince the Board to buy the scanner, and with Grimes a member, it's a done deal.

"Marry Evelyn, take her on a cruise, and forget the whole thing."

Ben shrugged. "I'd like to, but I can't until Jack dies, and she can't move in until we're married. It doesn't seem right we have to wait until he croaks before we make our relationship official, but those are the rules.

"Even if I could marry her now, the cruise would have to wait until after I make Sonics prove the town can afford it's machine, which it can't do," he said.

"I wouldn't tell Ev she comes second to the corruption in that hospital," Peter warned. He wiped his mouth on his napkin and stood from the table. "I wonder if there is a Saint Wiggins on a some religious calendar? Anyway, I gotta run. I don't want to face Montfort's wrath."

The friends shook hands, and Peter hurried to the courthouse. Ben paid the bill, then took a taxi to the Buick dealership to pick up his car. After a quick walk-around to make sure the mechanics had not added a new dent to his vehicle, even though the space available for such an addition was quite limited. Ben paid for the new set of spark plugs, the second in thirty years, and begin the long trip back to his stately Santa Fe home in its cul-de-sac.

Three hours and sixty miles later, Ben parked his rejuvenated jalopy in his driveway. He shouldered open his door, exited the smoking Buick, and slammed the door a few times until the latch held. He limped up the flagstone path that wound around an eight-feet tall blue yucca to the porticoed entrance of his home. Each of the three cubes that comprised the stately stucco structure was offset from the larger one to its right and painted a different hue of brown. It was similar to a villa he had admired in a book on Tuscan architecture.

He unlocked the hand-wrought iron and glass door, waved to the life-sized wooden statues of Hotei, the Laughing Buddha, and Zocho, one of the four guardians who protect the world from demon attack, that guarded the archway to his large living room, and limped quickly to the jangling telephone.

"Ben?" Evelyn said before he could say a word, "turn on the TV. Hurry."

"What's––"

"Don't argue! Channel 2, the News Report."

Ben hung up and turned on the TV.

"…the issues facing the country," the attractive blond reporter was saying when he clicked on the channel, "is the high cost of health care which may bankrupt Medicare. Many criticize insurance companies because they consider them to be closer to the medical profession than to their clients who pay their

premiums. Doctors don't worry about costs if they know someone will pay them, no matter how high they are.

"CT scanners spot tumors deep inside the body, but it costs twelve billion dollars a year to run them, and it's increasing at the rate of twelve percent a year.

"But there's good news. Yesterday insurance companies put out tentative guidelines to limit the use of those machines. When they're finalized, they'll stop paying for these unnecessary expenses.

"Many feel they should also refuse to pay hospitals that overcharge, and to blacklist the expensive ones.

"Next, the weather, after a commercial break."

I wonder if Grimes is watching this? It makes no difference though. The only way to resolve the problem is to abolish all medical insurance.

Ben turned off his television and soothed his painful hip in a hot bath.

VIII

Breakfast at Evelyn's home the next morning was a tumultuous event for the usually happy couple, even though the sun was shining, the temperature was a comfortable eighty-one degrees, and the aroma of fresh perked coffee filled the air. On most days, while she prepared breakfast and Ben studied the flora in her garden from his rocking chair, she would ask, "What's it like out there?"

"Just another day in paradise," was his standard reply.

Today she did not ask, and Ben's thoughts were far from paradise.

"You're wrong, Ev. Damn it!" he groused, smacking his hand on the arm of the chair.

"I understand you, Ben. Believe me, I do," she replied from across the room. "You're angry because you think I'm betraying you by not supporting your objections to the scanner. Haven't you heard the expression, 'you can't fight city hall'?"

"Who hasn't? It’s older then I am." He went to the coffeepot on the counter and poured himself a cup of the stiff brew. He drank four

cups a day, and no one made it better than Evelyn. Usually when he passed close to her on the way to refill his cup, he would stop, hug her, and whisper, "I love you." This morning he carefully avoided any contact with her on the way to and from his window perch.

"This is wrong. You know I can't ignore it," he growled after returning to his chair.

"You're a tyrant. You want everything your own way, but you can't have it all the time. If these people are making a mistake, they'll pay for it!" She shook her head and looked away, her lips pressed tightly together.

"When will they pay for it, which, by the way, would be a first if they did?" he shouted. "Should they pay for it after they've stolen a million dollars from this poor town? Or maybe they'll pay for it after they've charged our impoverished patients triple what other communities charge for the same tests?

"And when they can't come up with twenty thousand dollars every three months to pay for a new X-ray tube," he continued in a loud voice, his face livid with rage, "what happens? Does the machine just rust away while patients go to Phoenix to get their scans because we've trashed our contract with Maricopa Medical to come up here with its mobile unit once a week?"

Evelyn sighed. "You're impossible. I've got to get ready for work." She stomped out of the kitchen, whacking with her fist anything within her reach along the way to the

bathroom.

"Lock the door on your way out," she yelled before slamming the door.

An hour later Ben was limping down a hallway in the hospital when he came upon Cohen, Compton, and Grimes. As usual, they stopped conversing when he joined them. Anything more than a glance in his direction by a member of the triumvirate when he appeared in his vicinity, was considered anathema by the other two.

"Cat got your tongues?" he asked.

"The tongue slicer should get yours," Grimes growled, referring to a scissor type instrument used centuries earlier to slice the victim's tongue after his mouth was forced open.

"I didn't realize you were an expert on medieval torture, Abe. There must be money in it, or you wouldn't be," Ben snarled.

"Harrumph," the old doctor grunted.

"I have questions about the CT."

"Unless you join our group," Grimes interrupted, wagging a threatening finger an inch from Ben's face, "butt out. And this is the first and the last time I'm going to warn you."

"George," Ben asked, ignoring the threat, "whose idea is this?"

The sheepish administrator mumbled, "I don't know."

"Sure you do," he insisted. "Was it Grimes or was it Compton? Tell me."

"Well," he continued, looking at Grimes, "Dr. Compton proposed the idea to me, I told Dr. Grimes, and he proposed it to the Board."

"I figured as much. If there is money to be made, my distinguished colleague can't be far away. It is unethical for doctors to invest in a scanner they will misuse to pay it off, as a charlatan present among us already does with some of the useless equipment in his office."

"Are you suggesting I over treat my patients," Grimes yelled, fisting his hands rhythmically by his sides.

"You don't *treat* your patients, Grimes, you *screw* them," Ben replied with an arrogant laugh.

"Why you––" Grimes shouted as he lunged toward Ben.

"Easy, Abe," Compton ordered, quickly stepping between them. He grabbed Grimes by the shoulders. "He's just a crazy old coot. Let's not start a fight here."

"If you guys want to buy a scanner," Ben continued calmly, ignoring his enemy, "I suggest you pay for it with your own money and not with public funds.

"Art," he said, turning to the radiologist, "if *I* know we don't order enough scans in this place to pay off that machine, then *you* must know since you're the radiologist who interprets them."

"You're senile and out of touch, Ben," Compton replied with a condescending shrug. He watched Grimes walk away, shaking his fist

in the air, then continued, more patronizingly then before, "I could explain the facts to you, Wiggins, but you wouldn't understand them."

"I understand far more than you think," Ben protested, his nostrils flaring. "The truth is you think this deal is going to be a cash cow for your mysterious group. It won't be. I intend to stop the purchase."

"Ha! It's already a done deal," Compton snickered. "We're just playing with you protesters until we finalize it. And we'll tear *you* to pieces if you try to stop us."

"I'll go to the press," Ben threatened, flashing a crooked finger inches from Compton's face.

"And I'll block you, Ben," Cohen added hesitantly, unsure if his threat was forceful enough. He looked to Compton who nodded approval.

That evening Ben called Evelyn. The disagreement they had had that morning had weighed heavily on him all day. He could not bear to see her angry or upset, especially if he were the cause of her unhappiness.

"I'm sorry for being angry with you, my love," he said when she came on the phone.

"No apologies needed," she said in a still petulant voice. "Will you stop your crusade to block the scanner?"

"No."

Click.

IX

Ben had always believed altruism, not greed, should drive physicians in their quest to cure their patients, and he had threatened to take his case to the press if the Board persisted in its folly to buy an expensive CT scanner for a group of mostly anonymous and non-existent doctors. It seemed like a good idea during the heat of battle, but since he knew his warning was toothless, he had decided to await further developments before involving the townspeople in his battle.

His wait was shorter than he had expected. Two days later a reporter from the *Times,* the town's biweekly newspaper, called him. The woman had heard rumors, and knowing Ben's reputation as a maverick physician, wanted his opinion about the scanner.

She sent a copy of her vituperative article to each doctor in town before publishing it in the Thursday *Times*. As was predictable, it unleashed a firestorm of rebuttals, replies, and re-interviews.

Evelyn prepared their dinner while Ben skimmed the newspaper from his chair by the

window.

"You don't approve of my involvement in this issue," he said, adjusting his glasses, "and now I must admit you're right. I need to read these articles to you."

"If your fight is already in our local rag, it's too late to back out gracefully," she said with a shrug of her shoulders. "But what do they say?"

"The usual hypocritical crap from my colleagues."

"Are they long? Dinner is almost ready."

"Long enough. I love the way they report things in this town. They initiate a phone interview, send an email to the interested parties asking their opinion regarding the attacks against them, and then they print their interpretation of the facts based on whose side they're on."

Evelyn turned down the oven's burner as Ben cleared his throat.

Whitney can't support it (he read)

> Doctors fight for CT scanner at Whitney Community Hospital, while one says it's unnecessary.
>
> Dr. Benjamin Wiggins, a longtime practitioner in town, said the Sonics International 1200TG is obsolete. "It's the Edsel of scanners," he told this reporter. "The SI 1300T has replaced it."

Dr. Art Compton, a radiologist spearheading the purchase, said, “We will install the scanner within six months in our new Medical Arts Annex. It will cost $700 thousand, and ten to twenty doctors will buy it with a loan from the Coronado Hospital District. We won't make money, but we will break even in a few years.”

Dr. Wiggins disagreed. “This town can't support it,” he said. “Phoenix University Medical Center, a trauma center with 280 beds, orders three scans a day and can't afford its own unit. Our hospital has forty-five beds and we don't even average two scans a day. Sonics says we would need to order at least six a day to pay off their machine. Knowing this medical community as I do, I'm certain some of our doctors will order unnecessary scans to repay the loan.

"We now send ambulatory patients to Phoenix and scan our hospitalized patients in a mobile unit that arrives in town once a week. We don't need a scanner for an emergency such as a head injury, as my colleagues suggest, since it doesn't drill lifesaving holes in a patient’s skull. We only need to stabilize him here and transfer him to Phoenix for care and scanning by a neurosurgeon.”

Dr. Compton disagreed with Dr. Wiggins, stating, “we can already treat every illness in town, thanks to our top-rated specialists and superb surgeons. They need the CT to treat their patients.”

"Have you checked the price of a Kevlar vest?" Evelyn laughed outwardly, but her eyes, narrowed into slits, betrayed her inner fears.

"No," Ben replied, "but I will."

"Dinner is ready," she said, checking the roast in the oven. "Shall I burn it a little more?"

"Cute, my love," he said before returning to the newspaper.

Medical community up in arms (he read)

"We doctors are angry about Dr. Wiggins's recent comments to a *Times* reporter,” Dr. Abe Grimes said. “He called the Sonics International unit an 'Edsel,' a libelous statement. This is the best machine available.”

Grimes, who has been practicing in Whitney for forty-five years, is a member of the Board which has already agreed to loan $800 thousand to his group to purchase the machine.

He said the scanner is as efficient as machines costing millions more.

“We've backed this with our personal IOUs,” Grimes said before adding, “some people believed we are still taxing them, but we haven't for six years.

"We asked Dr. Wiggins to join our group, but he declined. We're disgusted by his boorish behavior toward the members of our distinguished medical community.”

Dr. Wiggins told this reporter, “I rarely use the hospital because I don't like what goes on there. These ‘distinguished' doctors say performing scans here will save money, but in fact scans here will cost $350 more than in Phoenix. I will not take part in this hoax my colleagues are perpetrating against the people in this impoverished town.”

When this reporter asked Dr. Grimes about the difference in costs Dr. Wiggins mentioned, he refused to answer, but explained, “qualified technicians will man our scanner twenty-four hours a day. It's lifesaving equipment. Excellent specialists run our ED. We can't keep sending patients to Phoenix for scans, or wait for the mobile unit to arrive from Phoenix. Half the time it's a no-show, and when it does come, it'll sometimes leave before it's finished scanning our patients.

“Twenty doctors agree we

desperately need this scanner," Grimes concluded. "Even a blind man can see they outvote the one semi-retired doctor who disagrees with them."

"I hate it when Grimes attacks you." Evelyn pouted, patting a bun of gray hair. "Talk about a hypocrite and a liar! Why is he so money hungry and dishonest?"

"He's always been that way," Ben shrugged. "He comes from a snotty and wealthy family. My grandmother cleaned their house, and Abe tormented me because she was Mexican and spoke broken English. He's six or seven years younger than I, but that didn't stop me from whipping his ass one day when his taunting got to be too much for me to handle politely. He never did it again." Ben chuckled at the memory.

"Like many sons of the privileged class, he was a slacker who had only to wish for something for it to come true. When he got into some serious trouble in college, his father cut off his allowance and his tuition. I heard him tell Abe he'd never amount to anything, and that he was cutting him out of his will.

"Grimes left home, took odd jobs to get through college and medical school, and became a doctor out of spite to show his father who was boss. It would have been a noble achievement, except he never was very competent.

"Since he wasn't becoming rich as an

honest doctor, and since his father kept his promise and left him nothing when he died, he became a model charlatan. He invents diseases and then creates sham therapies to cure them. He's the poster boy for today's drug companies," he laughed.

"How's dinner coming along?"

"It’s going through the charcoal phase. It’ll be ash soon," Evelyn replied, peering into the oven.

"Turn off the burners," Ben ordered.

"It'll still be ruined," she said, sucking her teeth. "We'll feed it to the dog."

"We don't have a dog," Ben replied.

"We'll rent one for the evening," she giggled.

"When his phony cures didn't make him rich," he continued recounting Grimes’s history, "Abe started performing hysterectomies on young teenagers whom he convinced might have uterine cancer, even though all they had were irregular periods that would straighten out as they matured. Of course they needed a few thousand bucks cash if they wanted his 'cure.' He earns hundreds of thousands of dollars a year ripping off medically unsophisticated patients whom he fools with his selling skills."

Evelyn nodded repeatedly. "Now I understand why he became so enraged when I told you about those hysterectomies." She opened the oven door, wrinkled her nose at the blackening mass, and closed it.

Ben nodded. "I chastised him about his deviant behavior on many occasions, but I missed the hysterectomies until you told me about them. I turned him into the state, but, as you know, its investigation was a whitewash. The *Times* praised Grimes's reasons for his surgery, and subtlety, or maybe not so subtlely, called me a tattletale and a whiner. It almost called me a drunk, as Abe told the state inspector I was."

"Ben!" Evelyn shouted, her face hardened, eyes unblinking. "Don't you dare say that!"

"Unfortunately it was true at the time," he replied meekly. "I was already an emotional mess because of James's death and my divorce. Everyone knew I was drinking too much. It almost cost me my license."

"And it almost cost me my job," Evelyn pursed her lips in thought. *Damn memories.*

"I wouldn't have let that happen. Georgina backed off since he was afraid I'd pull the skeletons out of his closet if he did."

"I once believed all doctors were honest and competent like you. Boy was I mistaken," Ev said.

"It's not easy being me," he croaked. "I'm sorry I became a doctor. I can’t stand by and watch Grimes and the others convince their patients they might die if they don't let them use their expensive toys on them at every visit. It’ll be worse now if they can add a million dollar scanner they got for free to their inventory of money extractors."

"Are we ready to eat now, or should I burn the meat a little more? It's almost charcoal," Evelyn asked. She rubbed the back of her hand across her brow. There were days when she dreamed of marrying Ben. This, she told herself, was not one of them.

"Burn it a little more. I have to read a few more letters."

Ben removed his glasses, smudged a lens with his handkerchief, and then replaced them.

Letters To The Editor (he read)

Nevins Replies to Wiggins

"Nevins too?" Evelyn interrupted. "He just finished his surgical residency and has been here only a short while."

"They're all in on this, although Tom Wells did speak out against it. Joe also said he might be against it."

"Was he pulling on his bent earlobe?"

"No, and I still can't figure out why he's not for it. Maybe he's got a grudge against one of the buyers and is trying to sabotage the deal."

"Could be," Evelyn replied.

Dear Members of the Board (he continued reading)

After Dr. Wiggins's ineffective objection to your $800 thousand loan to

Whitney Imaging Services, he felt he should present his case to the media.

There are errors in his article. The Sonics International 1200TG is not obsolete. Although it is a year older than 1300T, it is the industry standard. The quality of the scans of the two machines is the same, but ours costs $400 thousand less because it takes longer to produce the image.

Maricopa Radiology's FI CT/2980PP arrives once a week and is otherwise unavailable. Its images are inferior to our machine's.

Next is his claim that we do not need this machine for emergency care. We could keep many of the patients we now transfer to Phoenix in town if we had this machine.

Finally his false statement that there are no trauma specialists. Our two general surgeons are available twenty-four hours a day.

Twenty Whitnian health care providers need this machine to diagnose and treat their patients. Dr. Wiggins is the only one who disagrees. He rarely admits patients to WCH and has never used the mobile scanner that has been coming to Whitney for over a year.

If fringe elements like him block this project, then the outstanding

practitioners in town will go elsewhere.

Sincerely,
Marty Nevins, M.D.

"All that, and you're not even out of breath. Wow! Enough now. The meat is black," Evelyn said. "You'll never be able to chew it with your teeth. Take me out to dinner."

"This last letter," Ben said, returning to the newspaper, "is mine."

"I want Italian food." Evelyn's reply floated leisurely through the air, unacknowledged by human ears.

Wiggins rebuffs Grimes (he read)

Dear Editor:

Dr. Grimes's statements about the CT scanner might be amusing if they weren't so biased. Proposing the purchase as a Board member and interested party is a conflict of interest, and he knows this. He should avoid further public involvement in the scanner unless he wishes to explain his position to a judge.

The SI 1200TG scanner has been a poor seller across the country because of its inferior scans and its unreliability. Anyone can verify this by calling hospitals that use it.

The scanner does not save lives. A mobile scanner arrives once a week from Phoenix. It left before noon last week because it had only two scans to perform. That scanner produces superior images to those of the SI 1200TG. Again, anyone can verify this by calling hospitals that use it.

Maricopa Radiology would come to Whitney seven days a week if we had the work. Why do Dr. Grimes and his real and imaginary cohorts want to spend a huge amount of our money to provide a service that is already available to us with no capital outlay?

According to a bill in my office, Maricopa Radiology recently charged Whitney Community Hospital $500 for a scan. It in turn billed the patient $900. In another case, our hospital charged a patient $800 for a $500 scan.

If the first patient had gone directly to Maricopa Radiology, he would have saved $400, the second would have saved $300. WCH tacks these fees onto their bills just to retype and mail them.

Whitney Imaging Services's ‘much needed service’ is a rip-off. If Dr. Grimes and his colleagues had one ethical bone in their combined bodies, they would back away from this project before they make Whitney’s hospital an even bigger laughingstock than it

already is.

Twenty doctors may be against me, but twenty wrongs don't make a right. I encourage Whitnians to attend the next Board meeting.

Yours truly,
Benjamin Wiggins, M.D.

Evelyn shook her head. "I guess if you can risk your life, so can I. Take me out to dinner."

"My Buick is right outside the door."

"That's what I was referring to," she snickered.

"Let's go," he said. He tossed the newspaper on the counter, then added. "Don't throw it out. I need the articles for my scrapbook."

"I wish you'd destroy it. It upsets me to see your colleagues attack you publicly, but I'm bothered even more to see the record of your defeats sitting on our coffee table for our guests to read."

"I would feel the same if you were on the receiving end of this trash," Ben agreed. He took her in his arms and hugged her. "It’s not fun, but I've been through it before."

"And lost," Evelyn reminded him.

"But it won't stop me."

"I know," she sighed.

X

A week before the Coronado Hospital District Board meeting, Ben invited several of its members to his office. Rumors, accusations, and false and misleading statements by Compton's WIS group had taken the desert town by storm. He wanted to clarify his viewpoint in a calm, quiet environment, and he believed there was no better place than the small office he had called home for half a century.

An old desk, a worn leather chair with a lumpy seat, and a small bookcase overloaded with well-worn medical textbooks, were the only furnishings in the cubicle. Faded diplomas and colorful awards in simple frames hung between large, opposing windows that framed the sun in the morning and again in afternoon.

"Fringe element," indeed, he thought as he arranged four metal chairs in front of his desk. *How dare that pipsqueak Nevins call me a "fringe element" in the newspaper!*

He glanced out the window. *"Snowing" again,* he thought*.* Farmers were harvesting

their cotton at that time of the year, and the fibers from its seedpods covered everything with a fine white fluff. It was always a bad time for allergy suffers, but this year was the worst Ben could remember. Instead of the usual runny noses and teary eyes, he was seeing patients with wheezing and asthma, and they kept him in his office until late at night.

He sat at his desk and impatiently awaited his guests. He was tired after an unusually busy day, and he hoped they would be on time.

You're not a young man anymore, Benjamin. It won't matter if these people praise you or curse you after you tell them the truth. You should be with Evelyn…damn! What is Grimes going to do to her, now that I'm on his tail again?

His secretary's knock interrupted his thoughts. "Your guests are here," she said, stepping back from the doorway to allow Mario Petello and Linda Duenas to enter the room. The sixty-five-year-old socialite had been on the Board for forty years, and her name was synonymous with it. She was considered by the less well-off to be one of the town's 'elite.' In Whitney this meant she owned three old cars, only two of which were drivable.

Bernie Freigang, a bear of a man, and Jeremy Lutz, a diminutive thirty-year-old with thick glasses sitting high up his narrow nose, arrived minutes later. They apologized for

their tardiness, and sat next to their comrades.

"Thanks for coming," Ben said, extending his arms to encompass the people in front of him. "I invited you here to discuss the scanner in a quiet atmosphere, far from the hype and accusations that have become more interesting to Whitnians than knowing who shot JR in Dallas a few years ago."

Three people laughed. Lutz grunted. "You're showing your age, grandpa. Are we here to listen to nonsense, or do you have something important to tell us?" he asked, wrinkling his nose to push his glasses back into place. "I've got a dinner date."

Ben leaned back in his chair and shook his head at the young man. "I'm sorry, Mr. Lutz, I'll be brief," he said, although an apology was not at all what he had in mind to say to him.

"I know you think I'm a fuddy-duddy who likes to obstruct progress and cause trouble. I may be the former, but I'm not the latter. I've been in practice for over fifty years and have brought most of you and your children into the world. You know I order few tests, prescribe little medication, and have pulled you out of serious health crises. You would not have sought my help had you not believed in me."

"Please," Lutz interrupted again. "Maybe you're a great guy, but Dr. Grimes is my doctor, and I'm not interested in hearing how wonderful you are."

"Shut up, Jeremy!" Linda ordered loudly. "I told your mother she should have aborted

when she was pregnant with you. She should have listened to me.

"Please continue, Dr. Wiggins," she said over the laughter of her companions. "I apologize for my colleague's rudeness."

"No problem," he said. *If I were younger, I'd take him out back and kick his ass.*

"I am not against CT scans," he continued. "I myself order them to confirm a diagnosis that will need specialized care. I never order them routinely, however, and based on Dr. Compton's statement that WCH now orders only forty scans a month, I would assume my colleagues do the same. At least for the moment."

"What are you suggesting, Wiggins––"

"*Doctor* Wiggins, Jeremy. *Doctor* Wiggins," Linda demanded angrily. "Show some respect, or I'll smack it into you!"

"*Doctor* Wiggins," Lutz continued unrepentant, "are you suggesting our doctors will order unnecessary scans to pay for the machine?"

"I'm saying our forty-five-bed hospital would close if it didn't receive outside financial support, and that our seventeen doctors presently order fewer than two scans a day," Ben replied. "Do the math. The scanner you people are considering buying for seven hundred or eight hundred thousand dollars, the number varies, takes inferior scans and has a poor reliability rating. A better, more expensive model has replaced it, but it's still

not necessary."

"Who says it's inferior?" Lutz demanded. "You?"

"Where did you learn self-discipline and courtesy, Mr. Lutz? From Dr. Grimes?" Ben asked with unconcealed scorn. He leaned back, stared narrowly at Lutz, and after a few moments, said, "To answer your question, the chief technician at Freedland Memorial Hospital says so. He'll tell you about the problems he has with it if you ask him."

"Are we buying a dead horse?" Petello asked with a frown.

"No, but it is not the best in today's market, and even if it were, that's not the real problem here. Do any of you know how many scans you need to run a day to afford it?"

The Board members looked at one another, shook their shoulders, and then their heads in perfect unison.

"I thought so," Ben said. "According to Barbara Nezhad, Maricopa Radiology performs eight to ten scans a week here with its mobile unit. Leopoldo Ramirez from Sonics told me we'd have to scan one thousand four hundred and seven patients a year, or six patients a day, to pay off the machine you want to purchase from him. That's three times what we now order.

"Based on the obvious shortfall, which do you think WIS members will do to make their monthly mortgage payment: pay two-thirds of it from their own pockets, or increase the

number of scans they order?"

Petello gasped. "I...I don't understand."

"Mr. Lutz does though. Am I right Jeremy?" Ben asked, eyeing his adversary with consuming curiosity. The young man looked out the window, ignoring the question.

"It's simple," Ben explained, turning to Petello. "Either these people are altruists, which would be the best kept secret in town, or they will unnecessarily run Whitnians through their machine to pay for it."

"I don't believe they'd do that," Bernie Freigang protested. The big man, wearing clothes several sizes too small in a desperate and unsuccessful attempt to look thinner, ran a finger under his tight collar.

"Perhaps not, Mr. Freigang," Ben said. "But I suggest you not give WIS the money to buy that scanner.

"Mario," Ben continued, turning to the Board's president, "Grimes told the *Times* we no longer pay taxes to support the hospital. Even if it's true, that also misses the point. The money you control, whether you collected it last year, this year, or will collect it next year, belongs to the taxpayer.

"If it's surplus, instead of using it to support private enterprise, you should return it to the citizens of this town who need it much more than they need a scanner. You should at least let them vote on it, since it's their money you're spending.

"Again, I'm not against the scanner per se,"

Ben continued, rubbing a gnarled hand over his chin, "I'm against patients having to pay for it twice, once with their tax dollars, and then again for expensive scans they don't need.

"If this group wants it so badly, it should apply for a bank loan like any other business would do."

"It already did that," Linda volunteered, flinging an arm in the air. "The bank turned it down."

Ben laughed. "Bankers will not finance bogus projects. Maybe the Board should follow their lead."

"And maybe you should go to hell, old man," Lutz said angrily. He jumped from his chair and stormed out of the room.

"I'm so embarrassed--" Linda started to say.

Ben held up his knobby hand. "Don't be," he said gently. "He's not your problem. If you have any other questions, now is the time to ask them."

"No, I don't. Thanks for explaining some basic points, Dr. Wiggins," Petello said. "Our Board needs to rethink this project."

They shook hands and the remaining members left the office.

Fifteen minutes later Ben was in his spacious den, talking to Evelyn on the phone.

"Did they believe you?" she asked.

"I think so."

"Are you coming for dinner?"

"A quick shower and I'll be there. Love you."

"Love you too," Evelyn replied.

After dinner that night, Evelyn and Ben retired to her bedroom to watch a movie. Neither spent much time in front of the small television set on her dresser, but since it had a built in DVD player, Ben would occasionally rent a movie from the general store in town on his way to her home.

"John Wayne again?" Evelyn asked from the bathroom where she was putting up her hair. "I recognize the sound track."

"He inspires me," Ben laughed. "Especially when he's outnumbered twenty-to-one and still defeats the bad guys."

"It sounds like wishful thinking to me," she said. She turned off the bathroom light, walked to the bed, and stretched out along side of him. She rested her head on his chest and pretended to be engrossed by the Duke’s bravado against an enemy too numerous to count.

"Ev," he asked, pausing the film with the remote control, "how are you doing in the hospital? Is anyone attacking you because of me?"

"Er, um, no," she said. Ben sat up and looked at her.

"You're lying," he stated, studying her face. "I can tell by your voice. What are they doing to you?"

"You know how people are around here," she said. She sat up and bit her lower lip, and, after a few moments, added, "The nurses who agree with you are friendly to me. Those who think the CT will put Whitney on the map aren't."

"Whitney is a Fool's Paradise, a place to drive past when you're on your way from somewhere to somewhere else."

Evelyn laughed. "More or less."

"Have Cohen, Grimes, or Compton harassed you?"

"They snub me."

"I'll talk with them tomorrow," Ben said angrily.

"Please don't, Ben," Ev pleaded, placing her hand on his arm. "It'll only make matters worse. It's nothing compared to what you must be suffering."

"I'll live, don't you worry," he assured her, patting her hand.

"I wasn't worried. They won't hurt you physically, even though there's a rumor in the hospital that you and Grimes had a heated altercation in the hallway recently," she said with a side-long glance.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," Ben yawned. "A dog needs real teeth to bite effectively. His are as false as he is."

"I'm more concerned about what they'll do to your psyche," Evelyn continued. She reached for the cold cream on her nightstand and rubbed some of it on her legs. "I'll never

forget the night you fell and cut your head open. You could have died. I don't want something like that to happen again."

Ben lay back on the bed and turned up the sound on the TV. As he closed his eyes, Wayne, wearing a green beret, was tossing grenades at the enemy.

"I remember most of it," he murmured as he mentally tore off fifteen years from the calendar of his life.

"You can't go cold turkey alone, Ben," Evelyn had pleaded over the phone. "It's dangerous, even in a hospital with a competent staff to take care of you."

She had been right, as she always was in situations that threatened his well-being. This time, however, her admonitions were unnecessary. He knew how risky his absurd assurances to the contrary were. Despite his best efforts, he *had* lost a patient to the intractable seizures of DTs, delirium tremens, and he had wondered if his efforts at self cure would have the same unfortunate result.

"I'll be OK," he had assured her without conviction. "I've prepared all the medications I'll need. They’re lined up on the bathroom counter."

"I don't share your optimism," she had argued. "People have died withdrawing from far less alcohol than what you drink. And their physicians could think clearly, and treat them properly, when their seizures arrived. They

weren't drunken doctors treating themselves for DTs. How foolish you are! How will you find the right medication when your brain is mush?"

"If I get into trouble, I'll call you."

"Promise?"

"Yes. But don't send an ambulance. I'd rather die at home than wake up in WCH."

"You may not care about your life, but you're sure making mine difficult. What did you tell your secretary?"

"That I'll be in Mexico for a week. She'll reschedule my patients and send the emergencies to Phoenix."

"I do *not* approve of this, *Doctor*!" she had insisted before slamming the receiver in its cradle.

As he lay in bed during the Duke's firefight on the TV, he remembered being so drunk that he stumbled over furniture and careened into walls on his way to the bathroom that fateful night. "Ev is right," he had agreed as he lay on the floor just outside the bathroom door, wetting himself. "What *will* I do when my brain is mush? How *can* I treat my own seizures?"

He knew he had been foolhardy, but he had thought if he took his medications just before he had a seizure, he could prevent it from happening. He had laughed at the absurdity, vaguely amazed at even imagining such a scene.

He had had no recollection of the events on the second night of his home therapy, but

Evelyn had told him later that he had called her to ask her come over and shoo away the polar bear eating fish out of his nonexistent aquarium. She had told him also that when he didn't answer the bell, she had run to the rear door of the house, smashed its glass with a rock, and then had reached in and opened the lock.

She had been horrified to find him lying semiconscious on the floor in the kitchen. Blood was pouring from a deep gash in his scalp.

"If you die, I'll kill you, you stupid bastard," he thought he had heard her say as she knelt next to him. But since Evelyn never cursed, he figured it must have been the talking bear. He vaguely remembered something soft pressing his head into the floor, and a dark figure hovering over him waving a crooked box.

After he sobered up, Evelyn had told him she was the one cursing, she was pressing a dish towel against his lacerated scalp to stanch the bleeding, and the crooked box was his medical bag that she had brought in from his car so she could stitch his scalp wound. She had told him that she had wanted to knock some sense into him with it, but didn’t because she thought he had lost enough blood on his own.

Years later the scene was still fuzzy. How could it be any less when, lying on the floor just before he lost consciousness, zebras and gorillas were dancing on his kitchen table?

Evelyn had never left his side during his recovery. She had fed, bathed and cared for him until he awoke several days later, confused and exhausted from his near fatal ordeal. When she was convinced he could again care for himself, and before she stormed out of his house, she told him teary-eyed that he was the biggest damn idiot she had ever known, and that if he ever again pulled a stunt like the one he had just barely survived, he was on his own.

"Are you watching this gore, or are you asleep," Evelyn asked, shaking Ben's shoulder.

"I'm awake, my love. I was just thinking about how much I owe you and love you. You saved my life. When this is over, I'll retire. We'll stop living in sin," he chuckled, "and we'll go on a long cruise. Would you like that?"

"I'd love it, Ben," she said, "but Jack is still alive, even though Ronald says he's got liver cirrhosis and he's so yellow he looks like a turnip."

"We'll get married in Vegas and say he's dead," Ben said, covering his grin with a knobbed hand.

"Ben!" she shouted, appalled by the thought.

"Only kidding. Had enough of John for the night?" he asked.

"More than enough."

"Me too," he said. He flicked off the television and then the light on his nightstand.

XI

"Are you sure you won't come to the meeting tonight, Ev?" Ben asked over the phone. "It shouldn't take long. There won't be many people there."

"I love you dearly, Ben," she replied, "but I can't go. If Grimes attacked you, I'd scratch his eyes out."

"Meow," he purred.

"Seriously, I'd be more of a hindrance than a help. You're certain I can't talk you out of this?"

"Yes."

"You know even trees bend, if they don’t, they'd break in heavy winds."

"I'm dumber than a tree—I'll break before I bend."

Evelyn was right. Ben knew his colleagues would attack him at the meeting, but he also knew their white jackets symbolized anything but purity, and that their attacks would have no effect on him. What bothered him was that they criticized and ignored beliefs and practices which were old and revered when Hippocrates penned his Oath centuries ago.

"I'll be over later to tell you how it went. Maybe the meeting in my office with the Board members had a positive effect."

Evelyn scoffed at the idea. "Don't count on it. I'll wait up for you."

"Thanks. Wish me luck."

"You'll need a miracle."

Motion detectors turned on tulip shaped lights as Ben limped along the path to his Buick parked in the driveway. After the usual door banging, engine sputtering ritual, he drove ten miles an hour under the speed limit to the hospital, and parked half on the curb in front of the emergency department.

Donna waved to him as he limped through the ED on his way to the boardroom, but he was too concentrated on what awaited him to notice. People standing in the doorway, many of whom were his patients, moved aside to let him enter the packed room. Board members, a few doctors, and two men with cameras and microphones sat around a large oak table.

He walked over to a chair next to one occupied by a young black male.

"Dr. Wiggins?" he asked.

"Yes," Ben replied suspiciously.

"I'm Jim Reynolds from Maricopa Radiology," he said. "Barbara sends her regrets and me in her place. I hope that's OK."

"Oh, I see," he nodded. "It will be, Jim, if you can stand up to fire," Ben replied, patting the man's thick arm.

"I was in the Kuwaiti-Iraqi war. I think I

can, sir."

"Good."

Mario Petello's gavel sounded on its block.

"I'm calling this meeting to order now," he said. "We're here to discuss the CT scanner we intend to, I mean, we're thinking of buying."

Ben shook his head at the bungled introduction. *Peter and Ev are right. I'm wasting my time. These people have already decided to buy that damn thing. I should have listened to them and stayed home.*

"Linda Duenos could not be here tonight. She will be at our next meeting," Petello continued." Also, Dr. Grimes is over there," he said, pointing vaguely to a group of people sitting against a wall, "and will not vote on the scanner. His attorneys have told him it would be a conflict of interest if he took part in the discussion since he is a member of both the Board and WIS."

"I'll be back at the table when the discussion is over," Grimes yelled from his chair.

"Of course," Petello agreed, cocking his head in the direction of voice. "Before we begin," he continued, "I would like to share some history. We formed the District Board in 1966, when the community needed more doctors and better emergency care services.

"Today there are twenty-five doctors on staff at WCH. Recently we financed a new pediatric wing, and have lent money to Whitney Ambulance Service, Whitney Hospice

Service and the Whitney Aid to the Developmentally Disabled.

"We have also provided funds for medical scholarships and for food and transportation for senior citizens." Petello skimmed a paper in front of him and then leaned back in his chair.

"In nineteen ninety-eight, we reported over two million dollars in assets, half from loans we've made. We no longer levy taxes.

"When doctors approached us for a loan to buy a CT scanner, we listened. One board member, Dr. Abe Grimes, was so interested in the project, he joined Whitney Imaging Services. He is our chief adviser.

"We declared reserves of nine hundred fifty thousand dollars in the audit we filed with the county last year––"

"Even if we spend eight hundred thousand on the scanner," Demmie Merkley, the board's balding accountant interrupted from his seat at the end of the table, "we would still have a reserve of three hundred thousand from loans that are being repaid. Doctors will repay the CT loan in ten years at nine percent interest."

Dr. James Langly, appointed to the Board by Petello the day before, agreed. "We're meeting our own standards," he stated. "What we're doing is legal, since we're providing a community health service. I'm ready for a 'yes' ––"

Ben jumped from his chair. "Whether the District is collecting *new* taxes or not is

irrelevant," he protested. "It *is* using taxpayer money to support private enterprise, which is unethical and commonly referred to as ‘misappropriation of funds.’ The district should return the money to the taxpayer."

"You're damn right," a woman shouted from the doorway. "We barely survive on my husband's salary. We could desperately use a rebate."

Another woman stood from her chair in front of Ben’s. "My name is Louise Sacks," she huffed. "Giving tax revenues to a private, for-profit group is outrageous. I protest the Board's even considering such a move. And I don't like the verb forms and slurs I'm hearing, especially against Dr. Wiggins. Have you people already given this semi-anonymous group the money? *What the hell is going on here*?" she demanded to know in a raised voice. “And where the hell did you come from, Dr. Langly?”

"This is a bona fide meeting, Mrs. Sacks," Petello said, ignoring her questions. "Please take your seat and ask to be heard next time.

"Dr. Compton," he continued as the woman huffed and took her seat, "do you have anything to say?"

"Yes, Mr. President, I do." The elderly radiologist put his unlit pipe back in a pocket of his tweed jacket. "As I explained at our last meeting, we'll install a Sonics International 1200TG scanner in a new building next to the hospital. It would be available to all patients

on a twenty-four- hour basis."

Ben raised his hand. "Who will read the middle-of-the-night scans," he interrupted, "since everyone from your radiology group lives in Phoenix."

"Well, er, yes we do," he mumbled.

"Louder so everyone can hear you," Ben ordered. “You all live in Phoenix, correct?”

"Yes."

"So for a middle of the night emergency, you or a member of your group will drive sixty miles from Phoenix to read a scan performed on, for example, a severely head injured patient. Correct?"

Compton nodded and looked to Grimes, who was slowly shaking his head.

"Excuse me, Art, I didn't hear your answer."

"*Yes*!" he yelled.

"Thank you. No need to be shy about this. You have a wonderful begging voice that this audience just loves listening to.

“You know," Ben argued, his arms crossed defiantly in front of him, "time is of the essence in a head injury, and I know you’re so concerned about the welfare of our citizens that you’ll probably sleep in your car in the hospital parking lot so as not to delay even for a minute your reading of that scan,” he said sarcastically. “After you read it, confirming what the doctor on duty already knew, you send the patient to Phoenix for specialized care. Correct?"

"Yes."

"So where is all the time-saving you're bragging about, Art? This severely head injured patient has to wait ninety precious minutes for you to read his scan, and then another ninety minutes, if he's lucky, for the transportation to Phoenix.

"Wouldn't it be better for our ED doc to send him to Phoenix immediately?"

"A CT scanner would help doctors treat patients, establish the hospital as a medical center, and could attract a neurosurgeon to Whitney," Compton protested weakly.

"Get real, Art!" Ben said scornfully, flinging up his arms. "This town could never support a neurosurgeon. Do you really think a doctor who pays a hundred fifty thousand dollars a year for malpractice insurance is going to sit in an office in this godforsaken town waiting for the one head injury you're going to send him? And based on our statistics, that's one patient *a month*! And it's very likely he won't have health insurance, and therefore won't pay his hospital bill.

Ben turned to the audience. "People," he said, "we're talking about ripping off our entire community just to satisfy a few egos. Can we let that happen?"

He turned back to Petello as a few people yelled "no!" "Does the Board know the names of the twenty members of Whitney Imaging Services and their wives who intend to buy this scanner?" he asked.

"No," Petello replied, shaking his head.

"Dr. Compton, how about it? Tell us the names of your cohorts."

"Members of my group are doctors, hospital administrators, and their wives who have already signed promissory notes. As I have stated before, profit does not interest us. We want the scanner because it would be less expensive for patients if we had our own."

"Did you just say you've *already* signed the loan papers," Louise Sacks shouted, again jumping up from her chair.

George Cohen, who until now had been sitting quietly next to Abe Grimes, raised his hand. "The hospital controller and I are members of WIS. We think the scanner would increase our hospital's reputation," he said unenthusiastically.

"It'll take a heck of a lot more than a scanner to improve this hospital's reputation," Ben scoffed.

"This is ridiculous," Sacks exclaimed, shaking her fist at the Petello. "How can you lend money to a semi-anonymous group without financial statements. It's absurd! It's damn irresponsible!"

"Louise," Petello ordered, striking his gavel against its block, "take your seat! Raise your hand and wait for me to recognize you next time. Another outburst and I'll ask you to leave."

Ben leaned over to the war veteran next to him. "Ready?" he whispered.

The man nodded.

Ben turned back to the Board. "Mr. President," he said, "proponents of this scanner have presented a rosy but misleading picture of the unit you want to buy. I have asked a representative from Maricopa Radiology, the company that comes here once a week with its mobile unit, to enlighten you about the scanner business."

"A paid spy," Grimes growled.

"I am not!" the man protested, standing from his chair. "My name is Jim Reynolds, and we provide an average of eight to ten scans a week here. That's less than two a day.

"CT units are expensive to buy and maintain. The rule of thumb is one patient a day for every hundred thousand dollars spent. If you spent a million dollars, you'd need to scan ten patients a day. Our director has made a feasibility study of scanners in southern Arizona, and she told me Mercy is the only hospital with its own scanner. Greater Phoenix Memorial and Phoenix University Medical Center, which draw from a population base of a hundred twenty thousand, use our scanner because they cannot afford their own.

"I think the district should invest its money in extra hospital services. You can't perform open-heart surgery in every hospital, and you can't have a CT in every community," he added, "because if you did, costs would increase to the point where we'd all go out of business."

"BS," Grimes grumbled. "They just want to keep all the money for themselves."

Ben put a hand on Reynolds's arm to silence him before he could answer. "My highly esteemed colleague," he said to the gathering, "Dr. Abe Grimes, whom you all know to be an upright, competent, and compassionate physician--"

Peals of laughter interrupted his description of Grimes, and continued for several minutes, despite Petello's repetitive, crescendo pounding of his gavel.

Ben chuckled and waved a finger at Grimes, who clenched his fists and bared his teeth, but said nothing.

"Dr. Grimes's answer to my question, 'does Whitney need a scanner'?" Ben continued after order was restored, "is that WIS hopes to fire Maricopa Radiology, and to keep for itself what Maricopa Radiology earns from the scans its performs here. The fact is that Maricopa Radiology could not stay in business for long if WCH were its only client. If WIS employs its scanner based on present patient needs, and not on its monthly loan repayment schedule, the only thing its members will share is bankruptcy."

Grimes stood from his chair and faced his perennial adversary. "You're not even part of our medical community, Wiggins," he shouted, his face crimson with rage, "so sit down and shut up!"

"And this scandal is one of the many

reasons I intend to stay that way," Ben fired back. "The scanner you're trying to push on this town is an Edsel."

Compton pounded his fist on the table. "That's not true," he shouted. "The machine will meet our community's needs."

"We already have a mobile scanner when we need it," Wiggins argued. "We should continue using it until an increase in patient load justifies the investment!

"What will you charge for your scans, Art?"

George Cohen raised his hand. "Each scan will cost from three hundred to eighteen hundred dollars," he said.

"That's excessive," Ben argued. "Whitnians shouldn't have to pay eighteen hundred dollars for a scan that costs five hundred dollars in Phoenix. Doctors have a moral duty to consider the physical, emotional, and *financial* well-being of their patients. Forcing this monster on them violates all those principles."

"We know it's not going to make money right away," George explained weakly. "In four years it'll break even because we'll be ordering three scans a day by then. We currently order two and one-half scans a day," he said, counting on his fingers. He tried to bend his ring finger in half to represent the half scan, but gave up after a few tries. "We send some patients by ambulance to Phoenix and keep some for the mobile unit, which is why our average is higher than what Mr. Reynolds just told us.

"We don't treat head injuries here, but if we had a scanner, our doctors could tell if a patient had a head injury."

Ben raised his hands in an *I-give-up* gesture. "George," he said softly, as if talking to someone who had lived his entire life in a cardboard box, "if your doctors do not know if a patient has a head injury without doing a CT, this town is worse off than I thought."

Everyone laughed except Abe Grimes, who glared at Cohen.

"George," Ben continued, "even if you increase to three scans a day, you'll still be two or three shy of what you need to pay off the scanner. Are you going to donate your salary to make up the difference?" Laughter again rocked the room.

A Mexican sitting in a corner of the room raised his hand.

"The Board recognizes…," Petello said. "Excuse me, who are you?"

The man stood from his chair. "My name is Leopoldo Ramirez, and I represent Sonics International of Biloxi, Mississippi." A pin hitting the floor at that moment would have resounded like a cannon shot.

"I have heard some unfounded statements here tonight, and I intend to refer them to our legal department tomorrow," he said. "My company does not tolerate slander or libel, and our lawyers will file suit against the offending parties."

"BS. What I said against SI is common

knowledge," Ben replied, wagging a finger at the newcomer. "But since you're here, let me ask you a question." The Mexican squeezed his lips, and Ben wondered if he was also puckering a lower part of his anatomy.

"How many scans will WIS have to perform a day to break even."

"I don't know," he mumbled, returning to his seat.

"Of course you do, Mr. Ramirez. We spoke on the phone recently."

"I don't remember."

"Maybe I can refresh your memory. You told me we'd have to scan six patients a day to break even. George Cohen has just said they scan only two point five. You also said you doubted the machine was a wise investment. Do you remember telling me all that?"

"You have made damaging remarks about Sonics International," Ramirez replied, ignoring the question. "I will refer your comments to our legal department."

"Because I called your machine an Edsel? Look up the meaning before you waste your money in court. Anyway, I still insist that Whitney cannot afford your scanner.

"For purposes of debate, however," Ben continued more calmly, "I will consider the SI unit to be the best in the world so we can debate the main issue: can Whitney afford it."

Petello banged his gavel on the table. "Enough, gentlemen," he said. "The Board has not yet agreed to make the loan, but will make

its final decision at its Thursday meeting in the auditorium at City Hall.

"Also, based on what I've heard tonight, I want assurances from Sonics International that the unit is not obsolete. And I want financial information and a payback program with exact figures on the costs from WIS.

"This meeting is adjourned," he said with a rap of his gavel.

The gathering scattered, and Ben and Jim Reynolds left the hospital together.

"I'd rather face the war in Kuwait again than that group of small town hypocrites," he said, shaking his head.

"Dirty politics is not specific to little towns," Ben replied. "They're just more personal. Can I give you a lift," he asked when they were outside the emergency room.

Reynolds looked at the disintegrating Buick parked on the curb. "No thanks, Dr. Wiggins," he laughed. "I'm just over in the lot. Can I give *you* a lift?"

Ben shook his head. *Wise guy.* "Thanks for coming. You were a help, but neither one of us will change the minds of those crooks."

The two men shook hands and parted company. Ben had hoped to impress Reynolds with his Open Sesame door trick, but to his dismay, the man just climbed into his car and drove off without looking back. Ben climbed behind the wheel of his rolling museum and turned the key in the ignition. As usual, the old engine balked at his first few tries to start it,

but when it finally turned over, he ground it into gear, bounced off the curb, and sped to Evelyn's house at twenty miles an hour.

It was only five under the limit.

XII

Two days after the District Board meeting, Ben sat at his newly refinished desk in his large study. An intricately designed Tiffany lamp and his computer shared its new leather top, and Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* was in the air.

The youth who had set up the computer had taught him, not impatiently, how to run a simple program to write letters and address envelopes. It had all seemed so straightforward then. As Ben stared bewilderingly at the blinking cursor on the screen, his phone rang. He limped to the table in front of the bay window and picked up the receiver.

"Yes?" he answered cautiously.

"Honey, it's me."

"Ev, hi!" he exclaimed, as if he had not heard her voice in years, "what's up?"

"Will you be home for a while?"

"All day."

"I'm coming over."

Ben hung up and returned to his computer. He struggled to type a letter with his knobby

fingers poking randomly on the huge multifunction keyboard, moaning that the machine was not making his life as easy and productive as the sales clerk had guaranteed.

"Ben?" Evelyn called from the hallway minutes later. "Where are you?"

"In the study."

"Coming," she replied. But when she did not arrive, he went to look for her. She was standing in front of a glass display case in the hallway, studying the four-feet-long model of the Italian cadet training ship, *Amerigo Vespucci,* he had built years earlier.

"You like it?" he asked, wrapping his arms around her.

"I love it. It's beautiful."

"And I love you," he said, burying his nose in her hair. "After we're married," he whispered in her ear, "it'll be one of the many gifts I'll shower on you."

"I'll cherish it forever. Have you read the news?" she asked. She turned to him and held up two newspapers.

"I glanced at the *Times.* More lies," he replied as they linked arms and walked to the study.

"This is my favorite room in this mansion," she said, crossing to the window. "I could watch the water cascade over those rocks into the pool for hours. It's so relaxing."

"It's *not* a mansion, and I'm *not* relaxed," Ben griped. He turned down the volume on the stereo and returned to his desk. "This dang

computer is ruining my day."

"What are you writing?" she asked, walking up behind him. She peered over his shoulder and caressed his bald head.

"A letter to the editor."

"Of both newspapers?" she asked placing them on the desk.

"Newspapers? Two? All I have is the *Times*."

"They trashed you in the *Globe* too."

"What did they say?" he asked without looking up from his monitor.

"Have you thought about getting a wig?"

"They want me to buy a toupee?" he laughed.

"No, but your head is like a shiny golden globe. It distracts me," she giggled.

"What did they say in the other *Globe*?"

"The newspapers agree on one point: Sonics is suing you for calling their Edsel an Edsel. They devoted almost their entire articles to the lawsuit, even though they admitted their reporters hadn't contacted you or Sonics for details.

“They’re writing fiction, again.”

“Did they mention there just happened to have been a little discussion about the scanner at the meeting?" Ben asked.

"Briefly."

"SI will do whatever it takes to get its unit into this town. Its threat of a lawsuit is just a slimy tactic," he said, tapping several keys on his keyboard at the same time. A series of

symbols intermingled with letters and an occasional number marched across the screen. "This is a political, not a personal, battle. They wouldn't stand a chance in court. What the hell is this mess?" he asked no one.

"So what are you writing?" Ev wondered, staring at the gibberish on the computer screen.

"An abject apology to Sonics."

"'Abject'? You? You can't even spell that word, at least according to what I'm reading."

"It's not 'abject,' it's 'a jerk.' It's what I'm calling Ramirez."

"To whom are you sending this cryptogram?"

"To the *Times,* and now, thanks to you, to the *Globe*, if I can finish it this year. I need to retract the Edsel statement and to slap a reporter's wrists. The scanner *is* an Edsel, but Grimes and Compton will focus on the phony lawsuit to try to make their Edsel look like a Thunderbird."

He tried to backspace the unwanted characters, but after a few seconds, flung up his hands in frustration. "Sonics knows its machine is a poor seller with a long list of problems," he explained, scratching his head. "Grimes and his cronies don't want anyone to know that. I intend to stay focused on the rip-off."

"Let me write the article for you. Just tell me what you want to say so we can get out of here in time for dinner and a movie in

Phoenix."

"I'll need to gas up first," Ben replied.

"Not today, you don't. We'll take my car. Now move over and let me play with your new toy."

Two days later, Ben's letter was spread across the front page of the *Times*. No letter to the editor had ever before appeared as a lead article in the newspaper, and Ben laughed when he saw it.

There mustn't be any stampeding cows in the supermarket to report on today.

> Wiggins retracts "Edsel" statement (the headline screamed)
>
> Dear Editor:
>
> I attended the District Board meeting to explain why a CT scanner is economically unfeasible in this community. I *clearly* stated, "I will consider the SI unit to be the best in the world so we can debate whether Whitney can afford it."
>
> The comments I made at the meeting were factual and uncontested. I used the word "obsolete" because according to written reports from those in the field, the MRI will replace the CT scanner soon, as the CT has replaced conventional X-ray.

This does not single out SI, which for many years has been a leader in the field, but includes all producers of CT scanners.

The quality of the scanner is of no importance. For you to focus on a brief statement, the hint of a lawsuit against me, while ignoring the main purpose of the meeting, which was to decide whether this community can afford a scanner, is an exercise in sensationalism at the expense of journalism.

However, I wish to retract the word “Edsel” which has been attributed to me in reference to the unit. It is inappropriate and uncomplimentary to the reputation of Sonics International.

Yours truly,
Benjamin Wiggins, M.D.

Ben dropped the newspaper on top of the others on his desk. He now had four to cut up and paste in Eric Leighton's scrapbook of war stories. His mentor had warned him the day he opened his practice in Whitney that the medical profession, especially its local branch, was not as altruistic as it pretended to be. "Doctors," Eric had told him repeatedly over the years, "are not the brightest candles on the cake. All it takes to be one is a big ass to

prove you've sat at a desk long enough to learn a few of the principles of medicine, but not necessarily its practice."

I wonder if old Eric wishes he'd left me a bigger scrapbook?

XIII

On a very slow day in his office, Ben passed the time reading the biography of King Henry VIII. The powerful English ruler had made a lasting mark on the history of his country, but he did not envy him, since, as in his own case, the king had been surrounded by more conspirators than friends. He was jealous of his power to lop off heads, however, since there were some in Whitney he felt belonged in a straw basket. He knew Henry would not have hesitated to put them there.

Over the decades he had watched his practice dwindle from a hectic office staffed with nurses, secretaries, and clerks, to one a lone secretary could run by herself and still have time for a quick nap.

“Change isn’t always for the better in medicine,” he had complained to Evelyn during one of their Sunday morning walks around the lake. “We once spent time talking to and examining our patients to arrive at a diagnosis of their disease. We rarely ordered laboratory tests, and costs were low. Doctors now make their patients fill out a health

questionnaire so they doesn’t have to talk to them, skip the hands-on physical, and order numerous tests hoping the laboratory will make the diagnosis for them. It’s disgraceful.”

"Ben, darling,” Evelyn had replied, “civilization is a series of sinusoidal curves. Medicine, like everything else, is slipping down the negative slope. Once it reaches bottom, it will climb back up to the noble profession it should be."

"I won't be around to see that happen," he had grumbled as they returned to his car for the long drive home.

That afternoon, as he prepared to leave his office to lunch with Evelyn, Peter Henry entered waving a newspaper.

"Are you in a rush?"

"I always have time for you, Peter. How's your hip?"

"Like yours," he laughed. "Find a cure for old age, and I'll have you canonized."

"Some in this town would much prefer to shoot me from a cannon," he said with a frown.

"That's why I'm here." He slapped the newspaper on the desk. "Do you think Sonics will sue you?"

"Not likely. Grimes and Compton will play up the story, but it'll go nowhere."

"Why don't you take that cruise with Ev I suggested?" Peter asked, slowly shifting his weight from one leg to the other, then back

again.

"We will eventually, even though I hate cruises. I can eat and play shuffleboard in my backyard, without getting seasick," he laughed.

"Do you want me to write to Sonics?"

"No. I'll let you know if their lawyer contacts me."

"Ben," Peter said, leaning on the desk. "I'll be with you at the next district debacle."

"Want to get your name in the papers?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Hell no! I want to keep yours out of them. You can't stop this scanner alone. Unless there's a huge public outcry at the next meeting, they'll win, if they haven't already. And they'll pound you into the ground doing it."

"I know, but––"

"But nothing. You've fought for the people of this dusty community all your life. If they choose to ignore your warnings, the problem is theirs, not yours."

Ben passed a hand over his bald head and down his neck before resting it in his lap. "Evelyn wants me to get a wig," he said absentmindedly. "OK. I can use the support," he agreed after a moment. "I should never have gotten involved in this fiasco. I don't give a damn if Grimes and his cronies get the scanner. I'll never use it. It just bothers me that––"

"...doctors don't uphold the code of ethics

they swore to uphold," Peter said, completing the sentence. He had heard the same story many times over the past fifty years, he could recite it forwards and backwards.

"Something like that."

"There is no code, Ben," Peter said, shaking his head. "You know there are dozens of versions of the Hippocratic Oath, and Hippocrates probably never even existed as one person. Yet you persist in your dream to see medicine become the noble profession you believe it should be.

"The Grimeses are the businessmen of the profession, and they're here to stay. Do you remember what George Bernard Shaw said about professions?"

"'They're conspiracies against the laity.'"

"Right. Let this go."

"After the next meeting."

"OK. We'll go together, and then you'll drop this."

"I promise."

"How are you doing?"

Ben shrugged. "My dreams are horrible. Evelyn knows what's going on in my bald head," he laughed, tapping it with the tips of his fingers. "She supports me, though, and will fight anyone who criticizes me."

"She's one in a million. Call me if you hear from Sonic's lawyers. I can still kick a few asses."

Ben stood from his chair. "I will. How about joining me and Evelyn for lunch?"

"I wouldn't dream of muscling in on you two lovebirds. Besides I get jealous when I see you together. The best my fat old wife will do for me is point to the refrigerator when I ask her to make me a sandwich."

Ben laughed. "I warned you her family name might be prophetic."

"Poke. As in ‘slow.’ I should have listened."

Ben edged around his desk and put an arm around Peter’s shoulders. "Come on, old-timer. Let's go to lunch. I promise I won't fawn over Evelyn."

That evening while reading the newspaper, Ben glanced at the date in its upper right corner and froze. November 13. It was the anniversary of his son's death. He dropped the paper in his lap and closed his eyes, waiting for that terrible scene to replay itself, as it frequently did, but never in as great a detail as it did on the anniversary of James’s death.

"He's dead, Ben! You should have stopped us. You could have prevented this tragedy," his had wife yelled hysterically between sobs. "It's all your fault!"

But the tragedy was not simply due to his negligence. James, the son he loved dearly, spoiled shamelessly, and neglected woefully because of his busy medical practice, lay dead in a pool of vomit in his bed. In one hand he held a bottle of Scotch, in the other a half-empty bottle of pain pills.

He never forgave himself for being too

busy taking care of others not to recognize his own son's addiction, and afterwards he had lamented that even the dumbest intern would have noticed James's progressive weight loss, mental confusion, tiredness, and his small pupils.

Ben had finally realized his son was on drugs when he overheard him slurring on the telephone. Searching his room later that day, he had found a bottle of painkillers, allegedly for a minor back injury, in James's night table. Abe Grimes's name was on the label.

"Abe, you will stop prescribing this crap for my son," he had shouted at Grimes in his office later that day, "or I'll beat the shit out of you! Do you understand me?"

Grimes shrugged. "I'll think about it," he snarled before pushing Ben out of the way and entering a patient room.

Two days later James was dead. Grimes, who never missed an opportunity to make a dollar, had agreed to Ben's wife's request to renew her son's prescription. He had also charged her for an office visit.

I'll never forgive you Grimes! I should have beaten the hell out of you as I promised.

XIV

Peter Henry knocked on Ben's wrought iron door at 7:45 on the night of the District Board meeting. Evelyn greeted him with a kiss on the cheek.

"Ben will be ready in a few minutes," she said.

"Run away with me," he pleaded with a twinkle in his eye. "Quick, before he realizes we're gone."

"You can barely walk, much less run, Peter," she chided. "But I'll give it some thought."

Ben, limping down the hall and brushing the lapels of his jacket, called out, "What are you two whispering?"

"Peter is making his usual proposal. You know, run away to Switzerland where we can ski eight hours a day."

"OK, but wait until after the meeting to leave," he snickered.

"Ben," she begged, putting her arms around his neck and staring into his eyes, "please don't go."

"I have to, but this will be the end of it, I

promise. Then we can all go skiing. Don't wait up for me."

"I will anyway, but you know what usually happens."

Ben nodded. "Ready, Peter?" he asked, turning to his friend.

"Let's go to battle," he replied, “like the two Musketeers, Potbelly and Uranus.”

“Actually there were four, although one, D'Artagnan, arrived after the famous three: Athos, Porthos, and Aramis,” Ben laughed, “but I get the meaning.”

Ben hugged Evelyn and told her he loved her before leaving the house, as he had done every day of their relationship. He did not harbor morbid thoughts about her dying suddenly, but if she were to do so and he had not told her he loved her that day, he would never forgive himself.

As they walked to Peter's car, the lawyer asked, "What did Ev mean when she said ‘you know what usually happens?"

"She’ll be asleep in her leather chair in front of the bay window in the den. One of Beethoven’s symphonies will be playing, the lights will be on in the yard, and water will be running over granite boulders into the lighted pool.

"She says it's as close to heaven as she'll ever get."

"Send her to my house if she wants to get as close to hell as she can get," the lawyer laughed.

"It can't be that bad," Ben replied as they climbed into Peter's SUV.

"Yes it can, my friend, yes it can. Don’t ever marry a covert narcissist," he said sadly. pressing his lips into a thin line.

They arrived at the town hall and limped to adjoining seats in the middle of the auditorium’s ascending gallery. A dozen of his patients arrived together, nodded at him, and then sat in front of, alongside of, and behind his seat, as if they were forming a human wall to protect him from darts, proverbial or otherwise, that someone might fire at him from the stage.

Joe Thompson and Tom Wells sat on the other side of the auditorium. They waved to Ben who nodded his reply.

Board members and their guests were conversing quietly around the large rectangular table in the middle of the stage until eight o'clock when President Petello banged his gavel on its block. Abe Grimes immediately left the table and took a seat in the front row of the audience.

"The Coronado Hospital District Board welcomes you tonight," Petello announced to the audience. "We're here to listen to your opinions about the scanner.

"We'll begin by having Dr. Compton provide us with any new information he may have."

"Thank you, Mr. President," the Whitney Imaging Services radiologist replied from the

far end of the table. "I have given Mr. Scofield our payback schedule, and a letter from Sonics International assuring you that an engineer in Phoenix will service the unit. A regional engineer in Fresno will back him up.

"Whitney Community Hospital has sixty-four doctors on staff, all of whom want to buy the scanner. The lone exception is Dr. Wiggins. I read his article in the Phoenix *Globe* in which he accused Whitney Imaging Services of wanting to rip off an entire community. That is a libelous and damaging statement, and I've sent it to my attorney for review. We agree, however, that the scanner will not make a profit."

"Thank you, Dr. Compton," Petello said. "I will now take questions from the audi––"

Ben jumped from his seat. "Listen to me, Compton," he growled, waving an angry finger at him, "if you and Sonics think you can silence me by threatening to sue me every time I say something you don't like, then go ahead. But understand that neither lawsuits nor shooting out my kneecaps will deter me from exposing this rip-off."

Petello's gavel rang out. "Stop this outburst immediately!" he ordered.

"But if you sissies *do* talk to a lawyer," Ben shouted, ignoring the increasingly loud banging of Petello’s gavel, "spell my name right. It's Wiggins, W-I-G-G-I-N-S! Not Wiggles, nor Wimpy, nor Waggles. It's a fine old Breton name derived from 'Wiucon,'

meaning ‘worthy,’ ‘high,' and ‘noble.’ All traits foreign to you people. Followers of William the Conquer introduced it into England."

Applause rocked the auditorium. Peter tried to pull Ben into his seat, but he yanked his arm from his grip.

"Dr. Wiggins, I'm warning you!" Petello shouted. He furiously pounded his gavel on its block, but the cheering from across the auditorium continued unabated for two minutes, muting Petello’s voice and his gavel.

"Don't get high and mighty with me, Mario Petello," Ben challenged after the audience quieted. "I pulled your ear when I caught you stealing cookies off my kitchen table years ago, and I'll come down there and do it again. If you want me to act civilly, then tell the pissants at your table to do the same. I *will not* tolerate threats from anyone."

The renewed laughter and applause was now at a level that could be heard outside the building. This time Petello waited for the outburst to fade away on its own. After the clamor died down, said, "I’m sorry, Dr. Wiggins. I'll do my best––"

"Good. Now," Ben continued in a softer voice amid an occasional gibe directed at the Board, "Compton, at the last meeting Dr. Wells rebutted your statement that we have twenty-two doctors on staff. Now you say we have *sixty-four* doctors, which is amazing for such a tiny hospital as ours. It's also a boldfaced lie.

"Who are these people?"

Compton stared intently at the papers on the table and did not respond to the question. After a minute of silence, Petello said, "I wish to thank Dr. Compton for his comments. Any other questions?"

Ben flopped down in his seat and shook his head. Peter leaned over to him. "Easy there, old fella'. You don't want to have a stroke and have Grimes take care of you, do you?"

Ben laughed. "These lying bastards are ticking me off."

"They're trying to rattle you. Don't let them see you that angry again," he warned.

Joe Thompson, the obese town surgeon, raised his hand. "Art, five doctors in town, including myself but not counting Ben, oppose the scanner. This either lowers the total number of doctors in favor to fifty-nine, or to fifty-eight if we include Dr. Wiggins. So I, like doctors Wells and Wiggins, ask you: who are these people, since they are not on our staff?"

"WCH does have sixty-four doctors on staff," Compton insisted, "but I can't give you their names for privacy reasons." The audience's renewed boos, foot stamping, and catcalls again brought the meeting to a halt.

Petello pounded his gavel on the table, missing its block. "Order," he demanded, "or I'll clear this room!"

Jeremy Lutz raised his hand from across the table. "Dr. Compton," he wondered, "do you guarantee any number of patients or money to Maricopa Radiology?"

"No," Compton replied. "But we pay them more than we would pay other companies, and pass the charges onto the patient. We have to limit the examinations we order, which sometimes results in inadequate studies."

"Bullshit!" a male voice shouted from the back of the auditorium. Petello smacked his gavel on the table.

"Scans cost twelve hundred dollars when the bill of shared hospital services is eight hundred dollars," Compton continued, unfazed by the scatological insult. "With our own scanner, we can avoid this. Our group does not plan to charge eighteen hundred dollars a scan, as George Cohen mistakenly stated at the last meeting. They'll be lower than in Phoenix, and I'll be available twenty-four hours a day to read them."

Ben stood from his chair and leaned forward on the back of the seat in front of him. Listening to Compton swap old lies with new ones exhausted him, yet his town, his people, and his love for his profession were at stake. He would defend them to the death from crooks and charlatans.

"Yes, Dr. Wiggins?" Petello asked.

"Art, you just said WCH bills twelve hundred dollars for an eight-hundred-dollar scan. Why the four hundred dollar difference?"

"Billing fees," he replied sheepishly. Ben shook his head. "Thieves," he mumbled. "I see a few new faces at the table," he added in a loud voice. "Does one of them belong to a

representative of Sonics?"

"Yes," a burly middle-aged man sitting next to Compton replied. "My name is John Stultz. What can I do for you?"

"I want to know how many scans we would have to do a day to break even."

"Sonics International is not a financial institution," he responded.

"It doesn't have to be to know the answer, but I'll rephrase the question. Do you think a forty-five bed hospital with a census of five patients a day can afford your expensive scanner?"

"Sonics International is not a financial institution," he repeated. "WIS has made conservative assumptions on utilization projections, and it looks like a profitable purchase."

“Yet the gang of thieves, I mean doctors, says it won’t make a profit. Are they lying?”

Ben plopped down in his chair without waiting for an answer. *Old King Henry would have made this bozo talk,* he thought. *And his words would have been his last. Zzz-plunk into the basket with his curly haired, nasally deformed, head.*

"Thank you, Mr. Stultz. Are there any more questions?" Petello said to his guest before turning his attention to the audience.

A woman in the front row raised her hand. "I thought the scanner would be in the ED, but it seems it will be in a different building. How will patients get to it?"

"By stretcher," Compton explained.

"You said you will be available to read the scans twenty-four hours a day," she continued. "Where do you live?"

"Phoenix."

"So it will take you a couple of hours to get to Whitney to read the scan, as Dr. Wiggins once stated?"

"Possibly less."

"Thank you again, Dr. Compton." Petello had realized that his star witness's unconvincing answers to simple, logical questions about the scanner were trouncing his reasons to purchase it. He wanted to end the meeting then and there, but cautiously asked, he hoped, for the last time, "Are there any more questions?"

Ben started to stand, but Peter gripped his arm, holding him in his seat. He looked his friend in the eye, shook his head, and then stood.

"My name is Peter Henry," he said in a stentorian voice he normally reserved for the courtroom, "and I am an attorney. I live in town, and I have offices here and in Phoenix. I'm fascinated by what I've heard here tonight, especially the flagrantly contradictory statements made by members of the Board, in particular those made by Dr. Compton.

"Quality of life and health are important," he continued, "but has the Board explored alternatives that could save more lives and relieve more suffering than the scanner may

do?

"Also Board members might not be the best businessmen. Mismanagement of funds results in liabilities."

"I object to your statements," Grimes protested, standing from his seat and pointing a finger at the lawyer. "It's obvious Dr. Wiggins has asked you to come here to tell us what to do," he shouted. "You're sticking your nose into our business. Wiggins hired you!"

At Grimes's accusations, Henry's face hardened and for several moments his eyes turned cold and unblinking. He then answered calmly but firmly, "Dr. Wiggins did not hire me, and I am not in his service."

Petello banged his gavel again. "Gentlemen! Please."

Peter sat in his chair as a woman in the audience yelled, "Fraud!"

"Disgraceful!" another woman yelled from the rear of the auditorium.

Mr. Jay Fremson, a local farmer wearing bib overalls, stood from his chair. "Mr. Petello," he asked, "might I suggest the Board delay a decision on this matter for ninety days to make sure that what it is doing is the best for Whitney?"

"We have followed correct procedures," Scofield scoffed. "We have studied the matter carefully, we have held public hearings, and we have listened to why doctors need a scanner to help the community.

"We don't pretend to be the font of all

wisdom, but we are investing in a scanner because doctors in our highly successful and prestigious medical community told us they like it and need it.

"Twenty doctors are good for the cost of this scanner. We might be in error, but we like our decision."

Petello added, his arms spread in front of him like a preacher's, "we have to look at the entire area, not just Whitney, as this will benefit all taxpayers who put money into it. We do the best we can to fulfill the needs of our wonderful doctors to benefit the sick."

Jeremy Lutz raised his hand, and after a nod from Petello, asked Stultz if Sonics International would grant an extension of ninety days. "I think we need the time for our attorney to review the comments we've heard here tonight."

"I don't have the authority," the representative replied, "but I don't see a problem granting the extension."

"We don't need an extension," Scofield retorted. "We've already decided."

"We have to be careful," Lutz replied.

"We've *been* careful," the lawyer insisted. "However, to make everyone happy, we'll postpone our decision to formalize the eight hundred thousand dollar loan until our meeting next week. I'll have everything put together the way we want by then. We'll just need to sign the resolution."

The gavel sounded once again. "Meeting

adjourned," Petello said, ignoring a raised hand in the back of the auditorium.

The Board members and their guests quickly walked to the curtain in the rear of the stage. Catcalls and boos continued until the last of them disappeared behind it.

Ben and Peter walked to the rear exit.

"Why did you speak out for me?" Ben asked.

"Because, old friend, you'd been through enough."

Ben nodded.

"No more meetings. You promised," Peter insisted.

"I won't, since they've already decided to buy the damn thing. But there will be newspaper reports, and I'll have to answer any insults from those bastards."

"Write what you want, just stay out of the meetings, or I'll have you committed because of mental cruelty."

"Mental cruelty?"

"It's what you're doing to Ev and me."

"I see," Ben laughed. "Get me home to Evelyn. I need a hug."

The two old friends limped to Peter's SUV. With Ben favoring his right leg and Peter his left, they swung to and fro like drunks walking home from a bar.

XV

Two days after the Board meeting, Ben sat alone in his kitchen drinking his usual morning mug of coffee. Disappointed that Evelyn would not be free for lunch, he would have had a dull and frustrating day had Peter not called.

"As you predicted," he said over the phone, "the *Times* is full of crap. You, or rather we, will have to answer some of it. The rest you can cut out and paste into that scrapbook of yours. By the way, how's it coming along?"

"I've got five more articles to add to it. Eric bought a big scrapbook to save his interesting but depressing war stories, and it's only half-full. Ev wants me to burn it, but I won't. You can destroy it after I die. Neither Eric nor I won any battles worth speaking of, and if someone like Grimes were to get a hold of it, he'd use it to ridicule us."

"You helped people in this town. They'll remember you, and so will posterity."

"Thanks, Peter. Now how can I flatter you?"

"No need to," he laughed. "Just have fresh coffee for me. I’m on my way over."

Fifteen minutes later Peter and Ben were sitting in twin leather chairs in front of the bay window in the den watching water bubble silently over a few boulders before it splashed into the pool.

"This is Evelyn's favorite spot," Ben said, patting the arms of his leather chair. "Reading, writing, mediating, she does them all here. She rarely talks about the gruff she has to put up with in the hospital, but I can see the stress in her face after a day in that dump. The frown, the absent stare, the half-lidded eyes, they're all there until she sits in this chair. When she leaves it, she's all smiles. How I love that woman!"

"And I can see *your* dreamy smile when you talk about her," Peter said, handing over a newspaper. "Take a look at today's *Times*. It'll wipe it off your face."

Ben opened the paper. Letters to the editor again made the headlines, this time filling the front page and a few more.

The first was from Dr. Compton:

> Dear Editor:
>
> Highly qualified medical specialists in Whitney provide services that until recently could be had only in Phoenix. We need to give them the tools they need to practice good medicine.
>
> Dr. Wiggins says Whitney can't afford a CT scanner, that we will "rip-

off" the community to pay for it. According to our projected payback, our group of twenty doctors and administrators will borrow $1,217 thousand for ten years with interest of $46,970.80.

Even though the return on our investment is questionable, we guarantee repayment of the loan. This is not a financial burden to the community since taxpayers will profit.

A mobile scanner itself is inadequate to our needs and bank financing is costly, but Board financing will correct both problems. We guarantee we will perform better scans at lower prices here than in Phoenix.

Dr. Wiggins implied we would misuse the scanner to repay the debt. Insurance companies, State and Federal governments, and the Joint Commission for Accreditation of Hospitals Utilization Review Committee will not allow this, since they will not pay for a procedure they consider unjustified.

Our purchase of the scanner is a sign of goodwill to the community. By joining hands with us, the Board will earn a return on its money, and we will provide a low cost service to our patients. It's unfortunate some elements are skeptical about our

gesture.

Our opposition has made slanderous and irresponsible remarks he later retracted. If this baseless opposition to progressive medical practice continues from a fringe element, the renowned doctors who have made this community their home will reconsider their decision.

Sincerely,
Arthur Compton, M.D.

Ben put down the paper. "Are Compton's eyes brown, Peter?"

"I don't know," he shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Why do you ask?"

"He's so full of it, I was just wondering how high the level is. Did you notice his latest figures? We're back to twenty doctors from sixty-four, and he now wants a million two hundred seventeen thousand dollars. This is fifty percent more than what he asked for initially. Demmie said the Board had reserves of nine hundred fifty thousand. Where is it getting the extra three hundred thousand?"

"Dunno. We'll ask about it in our reply to the rag," Peter replied. He stood and walked to the bookcase. "I love these books of yours," he said, pulling an old, red, leather-covered volume from the shelf. "*The Anatomy of the Brain and Nerves* by Thomas Willis," he said,

reading its spine. “You actually read this stuff?” he asked.

"Sure. Those old tomes, that book is from 1654, are good sources of information. Many of the diseases they describe have changed names over the centuries, but they are described unvarnished, from onset to resolution, good or bad as that may be. From studying those books, I know what might happen if I do not treat a patient. Knowing when to intervene and when to just watch and wait, is extremely important. If Mother Nature doesn’t need my help, I don’t give it. Patients never get side-effects from drugs I don’t prescribe for them.

“I've been collecting those books for years.” Ben explained. “They're easy to find, but expensive to buy. If the investments you made for me hadn't panned out, I never would have been able to afford them.

“Anyway….” His words trailed off and his gaze dimmed, as if was remembering something from the past. He shook his head and returned to the *Times’s article*.

> Dear Editor (he read)
>
> I urge fellow taxpayers to turn out in force for the next meeting of the Hospital District Board to tell them we do not want to loan our tax money to private enterprise.
>
> I might not know the exact meaning

of “rip off,” but this deal stinks of one.

Dr. Compton criticizes Dr. Wiggins for not using our local hospital, but he lives in Phoenix. I'd rather have Dr. Wiggins send me to Phoenix when I need a neurosurgeon, than to have to wait here until Dr. Compton decides to arrive.

Also Mr. Petello's wife works for Dr. Nevins, a proponent and benefactor of this loan. Would this have anything to do with his decision to vote for it?

The next Board meeting will be November 14 at eight. Everyone be there!

Name Withheld On Request

Note from the Editor: Dr. Compton lives in Phoenix but a new associate, Dr. Dennis Gold, lives in Whitney. Elvia Petello, wife of District Board President Mario Petello, told the *Times* she is a transcriber for the president of WIS. Board attorney Scofield told the *Times* that Petello’s position “is not a conflict of interest since there is no financial benefit."

"Have you read all these articles, Peter?" Ben asked. He rested the paper on his lap and watched the water cascade into the pool. He hoped, but doubted, it would make him smile

as it did his beloved Evelyn if he sat long enough in her chair.

"I skimmed them. You have citizen support, but I don't know if it'll be enough to fill the next meeting with protesters."

"Probably not," he sighed before returning to his newspaper.

Dear Editor (he read)

Hurrah! to Dr. Wiggins and all those who have raised suspicions about this scanner.

As a former WCH employee, I can confirm we ordered only one or two scans a day. I'm sure our doctors will order them more often to pay off the new scanner.

But who pays in the end? Dr. Wiggins says this is a “rip-off.” I agree, but reckless spending like this affects the whole country.

I see this deal as a few wanting the many to pay for their toys. I suggest we vote on (against) this matter.

Sincerely,
Laura Keser

"I'm sorry I got involved in this mess, Peter," Ben said, snapping the paper in his hands. The lawyer replaced the book on the shelf, and returned to his chair.

"I know," he said. "Have you read all the articles?"

"I'm on the last one now. This episode reminds me of something my mother would say when she sniffed out a plot. 'One lies and the other swears to it.' I laughed when she said it, but she never did. The corruption she witnessed in her day frustrated her, but she handled it better than I. I wish I were more like her."

He scanned the last letter from Nevins:

> What is a CT scanner and what is all the fuss about?
>
> What is a CT scanner?
>
> A CT or CAT scanner, the names are interchangeable, takes x-ray pictures in small slices as it turns around the patient. They are then fed into a computer to create a composite picture superior to that of a regular x-ray machine.
>
> Where does the money come from?
>
> It comes from previous tax dollars. The Board can make legal and ethical loans to private parties to improve medical services at WCH.
>
> The District considered three possibilities:
>
> 1. It would buy, manage and assume all profits or losses from the scanner;
>
> 2. It would buy the scanner and

then lease it to WIS;

3. It would loan us the money, and we would manage the scanner.

The Board chose to loan us the money at nine percent for ten years and not to assume the risks associated with its operation.

We have discussed all this at public meetings.

The scanner is top-notch. We can afford it only with a loan from the Board. We will break even in three years, and even if we do not, WIS will be responsible for repayment of the loan.

Ninety-five percent of Whitney's doctors support the scanner, which we need to improve patient care.

WIS's members, all of the highest integrity, have practiced in Whitney for one to forty-five years and will not take advantage of their doctor-patient relationship.

Marty Nevins, M.D., F.A.C.S.

Ben tossed the newspaper onto the windowsill. "Do you think anyone on that Board understands what's going on here?'

"Some might, but most are dumber than a shoe. One would have voted against it, but changed her mind."

Ben turned in his chair to face his friend. "Whom are you talking about?" he demanded.

"Maybe Evelyn can confirm the rumor about Linda Duenas."

"Linda? I spoke to her in my office about this. I had the feeling she would vote against it."

"She would have, until Cohen offered to name the building that will house the scanner after her."

"Damn it, Peter! He's bribing a public official. That's against the law!" Ben shouted, pounding the arm of his leather chair.

"That's true, but who'll do anything about it?"

"I––"

"Not on your life!" Peter scolded. "You swore you would drop this, and Ev and I intend to hold you to that promise."

"You're right," he sighed. "I'll keep my word, even if it'll keep me awake nights."

"You'll live," the lawyer shrugged. "Do you want to write your rebuttals to Nevins's comments now?"

"Let me get a glass of juice first. Meanwhile, see if you can figure out how to use my computer. Can I get you something?"

"No, my slug of a wife made me breakfast this morning."

"That's wonderful," Ben replied, standing from his chair. "See, she does love you!"

"She put a box of cereal by a bowl."

Ben laughed. "So much for true love," he

said as he left the study.

Ten minutes later he returned. A red liquid covered his shirt and one lens of his eyeglasses.

"What the devil happened to you?" Peter asked.

"I was opening a can of tomato juice and it exploded."

"You look like a crazy man," the lawyer laughed.

"I feel like one. Did you get that computer to work?"

"Yup, I've already typed the first line in your letter – 'Dear Editor.'"

"OK, let's finish it."

XVI

Ben treated only two patients in his office on a warm November morning, and they were as old and infirm as he. Although he prided himself on the fact that his patients never died, he did concede that they sometimes transferred to the next world. He wondered which of the two ninety-year-old women he treated that day would be the first.

He saw eight other patients that afternoon, then closed his office and limped to the general store across the street to buy a copy of the *Times*.

"You made the headlines again, Doc," the shopkeeper gloated. "We're sure glad we got you to defend us against them crooks."

Ben smiled as he read the headline, "Wiggins Continues Scanner Challenge." He tucked the newspaper under his arm.

"I appreciate the compliment, but unfortunately they beat me this time," he said as he counted out the change from his pocket. "Here, just enough, Tom," he added as he handed it over the counter.

"Dunno 'bout that," the old man replied as

he sorted the coins into his cash register. "We been talkin' round here. A lotta people are ticked at that Board, and at somma your buddies too."

"They aren't my 'buddies,' but if you people unite, you might be able to convince the Board to drop this project."

"We'll be at the meetin'. Will you?"

"Dunno yet, Tom," he replied, shrugging his shoulders. "I think I've done all I can, but we'll see."

Ben waved good-bye to the shopkeeper and limped to his Buick parked in front of his office. The arthritis in his hip had flared up, and he groaned as he slipped into the driver's seat. His old car must have sensed his discomfort, since it started up without a fuss and took him home without once hiccuping.

He was reading the *Times* in Evelyn's chair in the den when she walked into the room that afternoon.

"What are you doing home so soon?" Ben asked, dropping the paper on his lap. "Are you sick?" He tried to stand, but his leg cramped and he fell back into the chair.

"I'm fine, my love," she said, crossing the room to give him a kiss. "I had another disagreement with Cohen, and needed to get out of there."

"About what?"

"That fat, lazy, nurse sister-in-law of his. She's a danger to my patients. I've tried a dozen times to fire her, but he won't let me."

"Have you heard about his offering to name the new wing in his rancid square doughnut after Linda Duenas?"

"Word travels fast. Yes, it's true," she agreed.

"Georgina, Georgina," Ben lamented, looking up to the ceiling. "When will you grow up?"

"Is that today's paper?" Evelyn asked.

"Yes. Have you read it?"

"Only the headlines."

"A pack of lies. Have a seat," he ordered, "and I'll read you a fairy tale." Evelyn sat in the chair in front of the window.

"Peter and I wrote this the other day. The rag let Compton answer it before publishing it."

Dear Editor (he read)

To avoid unnecessary and distracting diatribe, I will preface this letter with a statement I have made on several occasions: the Sonics International 1200TG is the finest scanner in the world, and Dr. Compton is Whitney’s finest radiologist.

Dr. Compton has stated publicly he will make the scanner available to everyone, except the poor. He has stated he will provide scans twenty-four hours a day, yet he lives in Phoenix and comes to Whitney only twice a week.

Since there is no neurosurgeon or radiologist in town, a head injured patient would have to wait while he drives from Phoenix to interpret the scan before he transfers the patient to Phoenix to get the care he needs. Needlessly delaying his care puts him in a dangerous and possibly fatal situation.

He has stated we need the scanner for emergencies. He has stated we do not need it for emergencies.

George Cohen, the hospital administrator, has said scans will cost from $300 to $1,800. Dr. Compton says they will cost $400 to $600 in addition to his $200 fee, and will not be higher than in Phoenix. Scans here already cost over $1,000; in Phoenix they cost a maximum of $550.

Maricopa Radiology performed twenty-three scans a month here in August and September. That number increased to forty-four scans in October and forty-eight scans in November, and the month is only half over.

Even with this burst of activity, this averages 2.5 scans a day, far fewer than the six cases a day Sonics International says WIS will need to break even.

I have asked a Sonics representative if we could afford its

scanner–he told me they were not a financial institution.

Phoenix University Medical Center, a 280 bed trauma center, performs ninety scans a month and uses a mobile unit, as does Memorial Hospital with its 212 beds and seventy-nine scans. An economic impact study showed Phoenix would lose $500 thousand a year if it bought its own scanner, even if it increased the number of scans by thirty percent.

Goodyear Hospital with 110 beds and forty-four scans a month, also uses a mobile unit. Yet Sonics and doctors Compton and Grimes would like us to believe our forty-five bed hospital, which orders twenty-three scans a month, can afford its own scanner.

Utter nonsense!

Two mobile units now come to Whitney, MMI from Phoenix and American Radiology Services from San Diego. The latter will not perform emergency scans since it claims it is unethical to do so when proper care is not immediately available.

Dr. Compton has stated that ten, twenty, twenty-eight, sixty-four, and now again twenty local doctors are in favor of the unit. I and other doctors have repeatedly asked him for their names and addresses, but he has

refused to comply, citing an unknown piracy – I mean privacy – law.

Mr. Petello's wife works for Dr. Nevins. Since he is president of Whitney Imaging Services, this is a conflict of interest. Mr. Petello should dissociate himself from this matter.

The amount of the loan has varied from $800 thousand to $1,217 thousand, which Dr. Compton has quoted in a recent letter to the editor. The Board's accountant said at the last meeting it had reserves of $950 thousand.

Where will it get the extra $267,541.00? Will it raise new taxes?

Dr. Compton has said WIS will pay $46,970.00 in interest, which he states is nine percent over a ten-year period. Nine percent interest on $1,217 thousand for ten years is about $633 thousand. The interest he will pay is less than one percent.

Has the Board looked into the following:

1. Funding alternative services to benefit the community;

2. In-depth financial review to verify WIS will be able to repay the loan;

3. There are no conflicts of interest;

4. If the charges for scans rise above the maximum $500 Dr. Compton promised would not happen but which

is already happening, will the Board pay the difference?

Yours truly,
Benjamin. Wiggins, M.D.

"You need to say what you think, Ben" Evelyn laughed. "You'll get an ulcer if you hold it in."

"I wish some other people would get an ulcer, but having a conscience is a precondition," he griped. "Do you want me to read Compton's reply before I cut it out and past it into my scrapbook?"

"Why not. Cohen ruined my day, so let's hear if Compton ruined yours."

Compton Says Whitney Needs Scanner (he read)

Dear Editor:

I have already refuted Dr. Wiggins's false allegations and see no reason to do so again. Let me reiterate: we doctors need a CT scanner, and we asked the Board to join hands to provide a much-needed service without financial risk.

Unfortunately, one publicity seeker doubts our goodwill. I hope the Board will not change its decision because of this vocal and misled individual.

Sincerely,
Arthur Compton, M.D.
1905 Oxbow CT.
Phoenix, AZ 85016

"You've done all you can, Ben, now let it go."

He flung the paper over to his desk. "You're got vacation time coming," he said as he watched it splay open before landing on the chair. "Why don't we drive up to San Francisco? It's beautiful this time of year."

"In your old Buick?" She squinted, daring him to agree.

"No, dear," he replied with a laugh. "I'll be content to ride as a passenger in your car. Just get me out of this town before that damn Board votes on this abomination."

"Should we leave Monday?"

"I'll be ready at eight.

XVII

Evelyn was ten minutes early for her eight o'clock date with Ben. She had refueled her Toyota the night before and was eager to begin the long drive to San Francisco. The happy couple took several vacations a year and had always enjoyed them, as long as they traveled in her car.

Ben's suitcase was by the front door when she entered his home. Normally Beethoven would be in the air and he would be waiting to hug her as soon as she crossed the threshold, but today the big house was silent and he was not at his post. She panicked.

"Ben?" she shouted. He did not answer. She hurried to the bedroom before checking every other room in the house. She sighed with relief when she found him in the den, sitting in her favorite chair. He was reading the *Times* and mumbling.

"Did you have to buy that rag today?" she asked, crossing the room. "It'll ruin our trip."

"No it won't," he replied. "A *Times* reporter called me for an interview after you left last night. I just wanted to see if he quoted me

correctly."

"Did he?"

"Sorta, although he brought up my Edsel quote and SI's lawsuit to make me look bad."

"Quickly tell me about it so we can get going."

"Petello says the Board will decide on the loan at Thursday's meeting, after he gets information from SI and the financial statements of the WIS members that will sign promissory notes. He said the board could cancel it, but it's leaning toward approval.

"They quote me as saying the Edsel is economically unwise, and that I retracted my criticism of the unit after SI threatened me.

"I'm sure I ticked off a few of my colleagues, or at least I hope I did, by this statement:

> It's a violation of the trust placed in the Board by the citizens of this town to loan $800 thousand tax dollars to a group of private individuals to buy a scanner so it can charge them 333 percent more than they would pay in Phoenix for identical services.
>
> Any doctor who takes part in such a plan, especially in view of the tragic economic conditions in this community, is in violation of the moral code of the medical profession.

"Nice words, but wasted. Let's go," Evelyn

ordered, taking his hand and pulling him out of the chair. "We've got a long drive ahead of us."

Over the next few days, Ben and Evelyn traveled California's Highway 1, which paralleled one of the most beautiful coastlines in the world. They stayed at the magnificent Hearst Castle, which a newspaper tycoon had built with his company's funds, and enjoyed the nighttime party staged by locals to show how he and his guests might have dressed and celebrated in his time.

Once in San Francisco, they checked into an expensive hotel overlooking the Bay. Because of Ben's relentlessly throbbing hip, instead of walking, they took taxicabs to Chinatown, several museums, and to Haight-Ashbury.

On their last night in the city, they dined in a restaurant on Fisherman's Wharf. After the maître d' seated them in a dark alcove overlooking a narrow expanse of calm water between the restaurant and the mainland, a tousled haired waiter arrived to take their order.

"What would you suggest?" Ben asked the youth.

"The Dungeness crab is great."

"It sounds good to me. Ev, what would you like?"

"I'll have the same," she replied. The waiter suggested a white wine, but Ben

ordered two coffees instead. The young man, filled their water glasses from a pitcher on the table, then left to fill their orders.

"How's your hip, love?" Evelyn asked when they were alone. The flickering candle in the center of the table barely illuminated her still pretty features. Her hair had turned silver-gray during their years together, and crow's feet lined the corners of her eyes, but Ben thought she was more beautiful now than the day they first met in his office decades earlier.

"It's becoming a bore. I'll get it swapped out for a new one next year."

"Will you have Thompson do it?" she smiled.

"Sure," he replied, his mouth curving into a smile. "And I'll ask Grimes to assist at the surgery." Evelyn laughed.

"I've spoken with an orthopedic surgeon at Phoenix Memorial. It's all he does. Quick procedure and I'll be as good as new."

The waiter returned and tied plastic bibs around their necks. He topped up their water glasses, and left.

A minute later the maître d' arrived. "Are you Dr. Wiggins?" he asked.

"Yes."

"There's a phone call for you in the lobby. Please follow me."

Ben glanced at Evelyn, his forehead furrowed. She lifted an eyebrow and shrugged. “Dunno,” she mouthed.

Ben limped behind his guide to a bank of

telephones and picked up the receiver from the table. "Yes," he said. He listened for a few minutes, then hung up and returned to Evelyn. He was not smiling.

"Ben!" she asked, alarmed at seeing his down-turned lips. "What's happened?"

"Whitney has a new scanner," he explained with a tick of his tongue.

"How do you know?"

"Peter just called."

"And?"

"And we'll read about it when we return. There has been a major change in plans, even more absurd than the original ones. They're logical if you take my letters to the editor into account, but they don't make me feel any better."

Ben called over the waiter with a wave of his finger, and ordered a glass of white wine.

"That bad, huh?" Evelyn asked.

"It could be worse, and don't worry about my past drinking. I'll not return there."

The waiter arrived with the wine and their dinners and left again.

"So they did make the loan?" she asked as she tried unsuccessfully to pry a piece of meat from a crab leg with a two-pronged fork.

Ben pushed his dish aside and ignored her question. He drained his glass and ordered a refill. Evelyn frowned as she snapped a crab leg in half, spraying juice across the table. "Oops! Sorry," she giggled as he wiped the liquid off his chin with his bib.

"Happens all the time," he replied. But his mind was so far from the table that Evelyn could have clubbed him over his head with the crab and he would not have noticed.

The waiter brought him another glass of wine, and Ben twirled it in front of the flickering candle in a futile, absentminded attempt to examine its pale yellow color.

"The biggest problems in medicine today are greed and incompetence," he continued dejectedly after placing his glass on the table, "and as long as we have medical insurance, the health industry terrorists will never quit fucking us."

"Ben!"

"I apologize, Ev, but it's frustrating," he said, raising a hand from the table, then dropping it in his lap. "I'll never beat these people."

He gazed out the window at two scuba divers in a silver rubber boat. They adjusted their masks before rolling over its pontoons into the black water. Moments later wavy beams of light probed erratically into the pier's crevices.

"There's only one way to stop this – ban medical insurance. Fees would drop overnight, and abuses like this CT scanner would stop."

"There are battles you can win and wars you can't, Ben, but both are off-limits to you from now on," Evelyn said resolutely as she wiped her hands on her napkin. "There sure isn't much meat in two crab legs. What a rip-

off."

"What isn't anymore?" he shrugged.

“What isn’t what? Ben, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Where is your head right now?”

"Do you want desert?"

"No thanks."

"Then let's get out of here."

After agreeing with the waiter the crabs and wine were excellent, Ben paid the bill. They left the restaurant and strolled slowly about the wharf, stopping to look in the windows of stores no true San Franciscan would ever enter. When the alcohol began numbing his tormented brain, they hailed a cab and returned to their hotel.

Ben collapsed on the bed as soon as they entered their room. Evelyn helped him undress, and then sat on the bed and lifted his head onto her lap. As she gently stroked his ear, he stared bleary-eyed at a shapeless spot on the ceiling and, borrowing from its surrounding shadows, made it grow and shrink, creating a cast of mythical and mostly unfriendly creatures.

When he awoke the next morning, the sun was shining. They ate breakfast, packed their suitcases, and began the long trip back to Whitney.

XVIII

Ben and Evelyn arrived in Whitney late in the afternoon the next day. He had slept most of the trip and felt rested when she pulled into his driveway.

"Coming in?" he asked, taking her hand in his.

"No. I'm in the pit tomorrow and I need to get some sleep. I'm sure I'll hear a lot about the scanner deal, and if I'm tired, I might not hold back my true feelings about that place."

"Stay calm, my love. They're not after you. Ignore their sly remarks, and remember, you're better than they are."

"They can fire me if they want, as they tried to do years ago."

"And I kicked Georgina's ass for it," he smirked. "This time Grimes won, again. I lost, again. That'll be enough of a victory for them this week, so they'll leave you alone. See you tomorrow after work?"

"About six. I've got some shopping to do."

"I'll cook dinner. I bought a new cookbook called *Italian Cooking for Dummies*."

Evelyn laughed. "Then it isn't for you. I'll

eat whatever you make."

"Thanks for driving," Ben said. He leaned over and kissed her. "I love you."

"Love you too. Now get out of my car, I need to get home."

Ben pulled his small suitcase from the backseat and watched Evelyn back out of the driveway. He waved until her car disappeared from the cul-de-sac, and then shuffled up his walk. He took the newspapers Peter had left in a plastic bag tied to his wrought iron door, and entered his home.

He dropped his suitcase by the door, waved to Hotei and Zocho, and limped to his den. He put a CD of a piano concerto by Arthur Rubinstein on his stereo, and then fell into Evelyn's chair by the window, moaning as the usual pain shot through his hip.

Ben took the newspapers from the bag and opened the *Globe*. He ignored the *Times* for the moment since it favored the Board and usually included a snide remark about an "Edsel." He was in no mood for insults.

> District would buy unit, then lease it to WIS (he read)
>
> Despite pleas from the audience that the Board use the money for other health services, the Coronado Hospital District Board voted four to zero to spend $820 thousand in public funds to buy the scanner in partnership with a

group of private doctors. The group would lease it from the Board for ten years, and then would own it.

"Board president Petello, acting on Scofield's concern it might be a conflict of interest, did not vote because his wife works for a partner of WIS. Petello handed the gavel to board vice president, Dr. Bernard Langly, who warned the audience, "you're shooting yourselves in the head by not supporting the scanner."

"District funds are safe because we're putting our names on the loan," Dr. Art Compton, Whitney Community Hospital's chief of radiology, said. "WIS is a group of renowned doctors and hospital administrators who do not expect to make a profit; we simply want to provide better services to our patients." He also claimed the district will benefit from the interest which will total $474 thousand over ten years.

Dr. Nevins, a surgeon, said, "the community needs this scanner. We're seventeen doctors and hospital administrators, and might be twenty soon. We've introduced a new service at WCH, and, according to figures for the past fifteen weeks, we've averaged eleven scans a week, not including the patients we sent to Phoenix."

Board member, Dr. Abe Grimes,

gave a different figure. He said, “Twenty patients used the scanner last week and fifteen will use it this week.”

Mrs. Griselides Martinez, a local resident asked, “Isn't it odd that the number of scans has increased so much since you decided to buy the scanner?”

Board Member Jeremy Lutz replied, “they replace many other tests.” When questioned, he refused to specify which tests the scans replaced.

City councilwoman June Scolman wanted to put the issue on the November ballot, but Lutz said, “We could give the scanner to the hospital if we wanted to, but since the doctors are willing to take the risk, it benefits us to make the loan instead.”

Board member Linda Duenos said most of the people she has talked to are in favor.

Albert Bunn, a local resident, said the money could be better used for other community services. “If the doctors want it, let them get a bank loan, just like we have to when we want something.”

Duenos replied, “The bank refused to give them a loan.”

"If money professionals have refused it, doesn't that tell you something?” Bunn shouted back irately.

Duenos did not reply to his

question.

Dr. Benjamin Wiggins, the most vocal opponent of the scanner, did not attend the meeting.

American Radiology's Ron Gin, the company's chief technologist, told the *Globe* after the meeting, “We've averaged ten scans a week here for the last year. Last week we performed twenty. I don't know why. If it remains at that level, the scanner may pay for itself. If not, the district might be taking a financial risk.

"Whitney is a poor farming community and most of its residents are state welfare or Medicare patients." Gin estimated welfare pays a $140 a scan. “You lose money with those patients. The doctors should have bought the machine and taken the risk rather than the district."

Ben dropped the paper on the floor and reluctantly opened the *Times*. He glanced at the title before tossing it on top of the *Globe*.

No sense in getting twice as angry as I am now. Ev was right, you can't beat city hall.

He rose from the chair, limped to his desk, and turned on his computer.

Three hours later he read his letter to the editor on the monitor before printing it out:

Wiggins Medical Clinic

Whitney, Arizona

Dear Editor:

A group of doctors has asked our Board to buy a scanner to improve the care they provide our citizens. This is unnecessary and not in our best interests.

Using statistics from Phoenix University Medical Center, Memorial Hospital, and Goodyear Hospital, none of which has its own scanner, I have proven such a venture to be economically unfeasible.

I have shown that American Radiology Services and MMI arrive weekly to perform all the scans we currently need, and would come more often if asked to.

I pointed out that charging $1,800 for a scan that costs $536 in Phoenix is unconscionable, considering the low economic status of most of the people of this community.

I have documented that doctors would need to order 5.9 scans a day to pay for the machine. Now they order 1.4 a day.

I pointed out our doctors ordered twenty-three scans in August and September, but in October they ordered forty-four, and have ordered

forty-eight this month, twice what they did before they thought of buying the scanner. I have no doubt they will order even more unnecessary scans in the future.

I believe the doctors of WIS knowingly and conspiratorially ordered more scans than were medically indicated in a brazen attempt to fool the Board into believing Whitney needs a scanner.

The Board, by its repeated failure to recognize the economic facts surrounding the scanner, although each did privately to me, violated the fiduciary trust implicit in its position and acted against the best interests of the community.

Yours truly,
Benjamin Wiggins, M.D.

He printed the letter and sealed it in an envelope addressed to the *Times*.

Now let them try to sue me – again. We lost Ev, but maybe down the road, someone younger, smarter, and tougher than I will come along and save this place from itself.

XIX

The next night, when Evelyn arrived at Ben's home, he hugged her and told her he loved her, but she was stiff in his arms and did not reply, "love you too," as she always did.

"What's wrong?" he asked, releasing her.

"I need to get out of that dump," she replied. They walked to the kitchen where pots, pans, dishes, measuring cups, cans, and bottles covered every counter top.

"What happened here?" Evelyn gasped.

"Remember the book on Italian cooking I bought?"

"Yes."

"I was going to make tortellini except I don't have enough pots and pans. So I'm cooking spaghetti instead."

Evelyn went to the stove, pulled a limp noodle from the pot with a fork, tasted it, and then spit it into the sink.

"How long have you been boiling this?"

"An hour," he replied with a shrug. "Is that too long?"

"Not if you want to make glue. Do you have any more?"

"In the cupboard."

"Get it," she ordered as she poured the overcooked pasta down the food disposal. "I'd learn to cook spaghetti before I'd venture into a more complicated recipe like tortellini," she chided with a throaty laugh. She filled the pot with hot water and placed it on the stove to boil.

"So what happened in the hospital?" Ben wondered. He took two dishes from the pile on a counter and placed them on the table.

"The usual problems with Cohen's fat relative. She is as terrible a nurse as she is fat, and refuses to take orders. I asked him again today to let me fire her, but he grinned like an idiot and said he'd rather fire me instead."

"Nothing new there. What's really bothering you?"

"I met Cohen, Grimes, and Compton in the hallway." She suddenly became quiet and turned to the stove. Ben walked up and wrapped his arms around her.

"And?" he whispered in her ear.

"Nothing."

"Come on, open up," he prodded gently.

"Oh, Ben," she said, turning to him. "They were laughing about how they had convinced the 'dumb bastards' on the Board to buy the scanner, and how they had 'fucked you again,' excuse my language. I hate it when they talk about you like that." She cried on his shoulder.

"Ev, it's been the story of my life," he said, holding her tightly until she quieted. "I'm so

used to it, I'm disappointed when it doesn't happen," he laughed. He gently pushed her away and looked into her eyes.

"You're a great nurse. You're smart, honest, ethical, and a lot tougher than you think. And those are the reasons Georgina and Grimes don't like you. Don't let them get to you. Ignore them and just do your job."

She hugged him. "I love you. Let me move in with you. Please?"

"After we're married," he laughed. "You'd ruin my reputation if you did before then."

"Clown. Where's the spaghetti?" she asked, wiping her eyes. Turning back to the pot, she said simply, "water's boiling."

A few months later the CT scanned its first patient to great fanfare in Whitney Community Hospital's newly built Linda Duenos Pavilion. Cohen named the building to honor the District Board member who voted for the scanner, even though everyone knew she would have voted against it had he not done so.

Others, Abe Grimes in particular, outraged their names were not on the building, complained to Cohen. After a few closed-door sessions, he relented and made them as famous as their fellow Board member. Petello, even though he had not voted for the machine, had the reception area named after him, and Lutz, the waiting room. Grimes, despite his protests, found his name on a sign in the rear

of the building: Abe Grimes Restrooms.

Ben canceled his hip replacement surgery since, as he complained to Evelyn, it would only last ten years, and he did not want to undergo the surgery again when he was ninety. He continued limping down the halls of WCH, often bumping into colleagues.

Some, like Abe Grimes, mumbled obscenities as he passed them. Others, like Joe Thompson, the morbidly obese surgeon, would stop and talk with him about trifles. Ben never trusted Joe, especially when he tugged at his misshapen right ear, but he enjoyed the gossip.

One day in September, ten months after he lost the CT battle, Joe stopped him in the hallway.

"Did you hear the latest?" he asked. Ben shook his head. Joe was not tugging at his ear, so he presumed he would be telling the truth. "Cohen has hired some doctor from Italy to straighten out this place. He met someone at a meeting somewhere, maybe a gay bar, who told him this guy, who has been mourning his wife's death, needed to get back into the real world."

"What world does he live in now?" Ben wondered.

"Beats me, but Cohen asked me to call him and convince him to take the job. He sounded drunk. I could barely understand him."

"He won't last. They never do. When will he arrive?"

"November sometime. Maybe he needs to go into rehab first," Joe howled. "He's just what we need. Another loser, and a drunk to boot!"

Ben limped to Evelyn's office, waved in the doorway, and announced, "Gotta get home, love. I hear we're getting a doc to police this dump, and I need to prepare the new me."

"New you? Found the Fountain of Youth in Whitney, have you?" she laughed.

"Nope, the Fountain of Craziness," he replied. "If my esteemed colleagues think I'm a fool, I'll dress and act like one. Love you. See you tonight."

Ben left the hospital and drove his old Buick to the general store where he picked up a roll of tape and an assortment of the most exotic sauces, creams, toppings, and lotions he could find in dusty Whitney.

Once home, he lined them up on his kitchen counter and then took two jackets from his closet.

"I think a light sauce, maybe a mayonnaise, no, cream of tarter, would go nicely right here," he mumbled as he daubed half an inch of the white condiment on the lapel of the cotton jacket. "And perhaps a little red ketchup, no, yellow would be nicer. A dollop of Dijon mustard below the handkerchief pocket would be perfect." He added the mustard and then rubbed it with a napkin, making it seem as if he had tried unsuccessfully to remove it.

Ben treated his other jacket in a similar

fashion, but with ketchup and relish.

"That's enough for today," he mumbled as he put his purchases into the refrigerator. "'Fringe element,' publicity seeker,' 'misled individual,' 'crazy coot,'" he grumbled to himself. "How dare those pissants call me those names?

"I can't be King Henry, but I can be his court jester and keep an eye on this new doctor. I've got a couple of months to finish decorating these jackets before he arrives, so there's no hurry. Meanwhile I want my 'failed colleagues' to think I'm slowly going mad."

He left the jackets on the counter to dry and then picked up the roll of scotch tape.

"Peter said I looked crazy when he saw me covered in tomato juice. A strip of tape over one lens of my glasses should have the same effect as splattered juice."

He turned the tape around the lens a few times, put them on, and then went to the bathroom. He grinned at his reflection in the mirror.

It'll do just fine.

Ben and Evelyn's fight against medical hypocrisy and graft ends here, but they return in *Medical Grail*, the second volume of the *Medical Grail Trilogy*. In this sequel to *The Life and Times of Benjamin Wiggins, M.D.* they meet Robert Bascom, M.D., a young idealistic doctor recruited from Italy by George Cohen to improve conditions in his run-down hospital in the middle of Arizona's Sonoran desert.

The following chapter is from *Medical Grail, Revised Edition***.**

Chapter 1

Robert's shaking fingers grappled for the receiver of a phone he heard but could not see. It was dark and musty in that strange room. His clawed hand groped blindly for the rotary telephone. It scrabbled around, knocking an empty whiskey glass to the floor, before it found the jangling instrument. Only half awake, he put the receiver to his ear. He felt slightly dizzy.

"Pronto!" he slurred a word used by Italians to answer telephone calls. "Cris? Pronto!" He was speaking again to his dead wife.

"Dr. Bascom? Dr. Robert Bascom?" a female voice stuttered, confused by his reply.

"Yesh. Sorry," the thirty-five-year-old physician said, realizing his error. "Yesh, dammit," he mumbled. His wife had died months earlier, yet he still talked to her. When he did so among friends, they gently reminded him that she was in a better place. It angered him. Bascom did not consider lying in a coffin in a cold tomb in Italy “a better place.”

He sat up, ran a shaky hand through his hair, and squinted at his old army watch. It was between 0400 and 0600 hours. The dimly iridescent hands shimmered too much for him to be certain, but it made no difference. The phone call had interrupted a pleasant dream, and that annoyed him.

He snorted dust from his nostrils. "Who is this?" he asked.

"Donna Franklin. I'm a nurse at the hospital and I've a critical patient you need to see."

"Miss Franklin," he said, rubbing an eye with the heel of his hand, "I start work tomorrow morning, or this morning, whatever today is. I don't have staff privileges yet."

"Dr. Perkins says you can treat patients," she insisted. "There's no time to argue about this now. You can discuss it with Mr. Cohen in the morning, sir, but I need you here immediately."

"What've you got?" he yawned.

"An unresponsive twenty-five-year-old

Mexican who's cut his arm to the bone," she answered. "His blood pressure is fifty over zero, pulse thirty-two, and respirations four. I put in a Foley catheter, but he's got no urinary output."

"How much blood have you given him?" Bascom swung his legs over the side of the bed, cupped a hand in front of his nose and exhaled into it. The sour smell of stale alcohol bounced back at him, and he quickly turned his face from it. *If shock doesn't kill the guy, my breath sure will.*

He switched on the light on the nightstand. He had vowed to stop drinking the day he started work in Whitney, but he had not been able to resist pocketing the miniature bottles of Scotch the hostess had offered him on the flight from Italy. He should have disconnected his phone before draining them and falling asleep. Now he reeked of half-digested Scotch and he had to see a patient. Even if he was not drunk, being a tiny bit under the influence violated his rigid standards of proper physician behavior. Robert Bascom knew he would chastise himself over this lapse for weeks, or until some other convenient, guilt-producing breach of protocol replaced it.

"No blood, just saline," the nurse replied.

"Don't you treat blood loss by replacing it?"

"Yes, but I need a doctor's order."

"Aren't there any on duty in your emergency department?" Bascom's eyebrows furrowed with genuine concern.

"Dr. Perkins is here, but he's busy."

"Order six units of whole blood and three units of Hetastarch. I'm on my way."

He hung up the phone and stood, holding onto the nightstand until the wooziness passed. He rubbed his fingers over the stubble on his cheeks and thought about shaving, but there was no time. He donned the sweaty dress shirt he had worn on the plane, and fumbled with its buttons while cursing those nightcaps.

Bascom smoothed the shirtfront over his flabby abdomen and stepped unsteadily into his jeans, sucking in his stomach so he could button them. When he relaxed those muscles, a doughnut of flab oozed over his belt line. *Disgusting.* In the six months since his wife's death, he had morphed from a trim marathon runner into a human pear. He had agreed to modernize Whitney's hospital in an attempt to return to the Dr. Bascom his colleagues respected and sometimes feared. Unfortunately, he would make his debut appearance disguised as a street bum.

He pulled on his wool jacket and finger-combed his unkempt blond hair before exiting the house. It was November in the Arizona desert, and compared to the freezing temperatures in the Italian mountain town he had left the day before, the morning air felt spring-like.

Bascom paused on the empty street to get his bearings. The taxicab driver, on the way in

from the Phoenix airport, had told him the hospital was three blocks down and two over. But in which direction? He shrugged and started off in the direction he was facing.

He tried to freshen his breath with a mint spray he always carried with him, but the can was empty. He licked its nozzle, hoping a leftover drop of the sickly sweet liquid would mask the stale Scotch. If anyone got too close, he would breathe into his sleeve or hold his breath and step back from him. It had become part of his daily routine.

You know her death wasn't your fault, Bascom told himself. He tossed the canister into a trash bin as he hurried along the uneven sidewalk.

"You think it wasn't, but it was! You'll never live it down, Dr. Pain in the Ass Perfect." "Basta!" He smacked the side of his head with his fist to silence the cackling voice.

He pulled up the collar of his jacket and turned onto Apache Lane. An Emergency Department sign flickered in the distance, and he ran toward it, slowing to catch his breath before bursting through its doors. When Cristina was alive, he could have run the distance without working up a sweat. Now he gasped for air and held his chest like an old man having a heart attack.

A homely young woman, in a white dress and blue sweater, quickly rose from her chair as he approached the nursing station. He was wheezing.

"Are you in pain?" she asked, mistaking him for a patient. A well-dressed man seated next to her glanced up from his newspaper, frowned, and then resumed his reading.

"No, out of shape. I'm Dr. Bascom," he rasped. "Nurse Franklin called me in to see a patient."

"Oh, sure. He's over there," the woman said, pointing to the room behind him. He wheeled around and saw two patients lying on stretchers on opposite sides of the otherwise empty ward. One snored peacefully while a nurse and a young man in a blood-spattered uniform attended to the other. Even from where he stood, Bascom could see the patient was an unconscious, cadaverous young Mexican. He walked to the trio and read the vital signs flickering on the old, battered monitor next to the stretcher: heart rate twenty, blood pressure forty over thirty.

"Hi," Bascom said. He touched the Mexican's cheek with the back of his shaky hand. It was cold. Death was near. He clicked his tongue as he touched the dry, white gauze dressing over the man's arm.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the nurse staring at his shaking hand, and he quickly stuck it in his pocket. The woman, wearing a pale green scrub suit which did not hide her shapely curves, was dark-haired, brown-eyed, and in her early thirties. An American Sophia Loren – only much prettier.

She slid her granny glasses down to the

edge of her nose, shook her head, and then pushed them back up and read the label on the bag of blood.

She knows, Bascom realized. A new shiver of old shame crept over him.

"I'm glad you're here, doctor," she said as she compared the bag's label to the patient's wristband. "I'm Donna and this is Roberto, a paramedic from AZ-Amb," she explained, nodding to the emergency medical technician who rhythmically compressed a rubber Ambu bag attached to a tube in the patient's mouth.

"I'm sorry I woke you, but this man desperately needs your help."

"Those vitals are incompatible with life," Bascom said, shaking his head and pointing to the monitor. "It'll be impossible to save him. Has the Hetastarch arrived?"

"It's on the way."

"It treats shock by increasing plasma volume."

"I know what it does, doctor. You mumbled your order over the phone," she replied with a hint of a reprimand as she attached the bag to a pole at the head of the stretcher. "I wasn't sure if Hetastarch was what you wanted, but it sounded close enough, so I ordered it."

Haughty and contentious came to his mind. She irritated him, but he knew an unshaven, flabby, half dressed doctor, smelling of stale alcohol did not inspire confidence in the staff.

"Refresh the vitals, please," he said. *Mumbled?* he sighed. *She did say, "mumbled,"*

but she knew damn well I slurred my words.

Donna hit a button on the monitor and the blood-pressure cuff hissed softly as it slowly ballooned around the patient's arm. "Pulse twenty, pressure forty over thirty," she said. "I've never seen vitals so low before."

"He's agonal. On the verge of death," Bascom explained. A pharmacist arrived with the Hetastarch, and Donna hung a bag of it on the pole next to the blood bag.

"How did this happen, Roberto?" Bascom asked as he watched the nurse plug the tube from the Hetastarch into a needle in the man's arm. He cupped his hand discreetly over his mouth and breathed into it. The drop of breath freshener was not working, and he took a step back from the EMT.

"His ex-wife called nine-one-one as he broke into her apartment. He cut his arm on the broken glass in the door," Roberto said. He squeezed the bag and the patient's chest slowly rose as he forced air into his lungs.

"We found him a block away, lying in a pool of blood under a truck."

"How long was he there?"

"An hour or more," he replied. "We don't know for sure."

"He's past the 'Golden Hour,' the maximum a body can survive in a state of shock before irreversible tissue death sets in. And that dressing is bone-dry," Bascom said irately, pointing to the white gauze on the Mexican's arm. "The guy's out of blood."

"It was bloody when I changed it," the nurse protested weakly.

"I'm sure," he said with a tinge of sarcasm. "What were his vitals when he arrived?"

"Pressure eighty over fifty, pulse a hundred-forty," Roberto replied.

"Why didn't you transfuse him then, Miss Franklin?" Bascom asked. "You could have easily saved this man's life. This looks bad."

"I wanted to, but Dr. Perkins was busy," Donna said apologetically.

"Too busy to order for blood for a man who is dying right here in the ED?" Bascom fumed. "I don't believe this." He turned toward Dr. Perkins who, sensing his new colleague's anger, snapped his newspaper tight and hid his face behind it.

"Did you ask him specifically to order blood for this patient, Miss Franklin?" He dug his right hand deeper into his pocket and impatiently drummed the fingers of his left on the stretcher's railing.

"I asked him three times, actually I begged him the last two times," she said. "Each time he refused and said to call you."

"Busy doing *what*?" he insisted.

"What he's doing right now. Nothing," she replied. "Dr. Perkins won't treat Mexicans or Indians."

Bascom had worked with bungling physicians and corrupt physicians, but this was the first time he had ever worked with a killer physician. If the nurse told the truth,

Perkins was another Mengele, the infamous Nazi physician who performed deadly experiments on prisoners in concentration camps during World War II. Maybe Perkins didn't take pleasure in torturing his patients the way Mengele, “the Angel of Death,” did, but he had let a man bleed to death simply because he wasn’t white.

"I'll deal with him later," Bascom said through clenched teeth.

The nurse angled her head to his voice, like a puppy trying to understand a new command. "Someone should've dealt with him a long time ago," she muttered.

"Excuse me?" Bascom said as he watched a pale cherry soda blotch, far from the dense red color of blood, appear on the bandage.

"I said, ‘the IVs are running fine, doctor."

"Um, sure. Do you have an arterial repair kit?"

"In the OR."

"Get it."

After the nurse left, Bascom undid the bandage and beamed the overhead light into the jagged gash above the man's elbow. Deep in the wound a mixture of dilute blood and Hetastarch oozed from a severed artery. He crumpled a corner of the bandage, gently pressed it over the torn vessel, and held it in place until Donna returned and placed a blue bundle on the steel stand next to the stretcher.

"Put a finger on this," Bascom ordered before opening the surgical pack. He slipped

on a pair of sterile latex gloves as the nurse read the vital signs flashing on the monitor.

"His blood pressure is now forty over zero, doctor," she said. "He's in shock."

"You mean he's *still* in shock," Bascom corrected. He picked up a clamp, held it over the wound and nodded. Donna removed the gauze and he reached in to clamp the torn artery, but it was no longer bleeding.

"Measure his pressure again," he sighed, tossing the clamp onto the tray. It skidded noisily across the metal before landing silently on the blue towel. The nurse hit a button on the monitor and the blood pressure cuff inflated as Bascom took a penlight from the EMT's shirt pocket. He flashed its light into the young Mexican's eyes, but his pupils did not contract in response to it.

"Zero," she said. "No pressure and no heartbeat." She looked over at Bascom. "Should we start CPR?"

"It's too late for that," he said, replacing the penlight in the EMT's pocket. "He's dead, but he didn't need to be," Bascom rued as the monitor blared a warning that the patient's heart had stopped beating.

"Turn that thing off. I'm pronouncing him dead at seven-thirty," he added, looking at his watch.

"Is his family here?"

"No," Donna replied, shaking her head. "He's alone."

"Too bad you couldn't save this guy. You

did what you could," Bascom said, "under the circumstances."

He returned to the nursing station and took the chart the clerk held out to him.

“Would you have the social worker give his family the bad news?" he asked her.

"Sure," she agreed with a smile.

"Thanks. Where's Dr. Perkins?"

"He left a few minutes ago."

"Please tell Mr. Cohen I'll be in his office at three o’clock."

"I will."

Bascom documented the events on the dead man's chart and left the hospital. The thought of a bed, even a lumpy, dusty one, quickened his pace, and minutes later he entered his tan Santa Fe rental house. He glanced at its open-beamed ceilings, wound his way between the hand-hewn chairs and the river rock fireplace, and slouched down the narrow hall to the bedroom.

A queen-sized bed with a carved headboard and matching nightstands shared a cramped space with a rugged pine armoire that boasted a full-length mirror. He paused in front of it to stare at his disheveled self. *Cristina would kill me if she saw me like this,* he thought. He also knew that if she were alive, he would not be where he was, looking so scruffy.

He crouched down, opened his large suitcase on the floor, removed her picture, and traced her flowing blond hair with his finger.

Cristina smiled seductively back at him from her antique silver frame. "I miss you, Cris," he whispered. "I did what I could. But it wasn't enough. Forgive me."

He choked out the last word, and, setting his dead wife's photograph askew on the nightstand, collapsed on the bed and fell into a deep sleep.

The Author

Raymond C. Andrews is an American born physician who graduated from the University of Bologna Medical School in Italy in 1970. After training in general surgery, neurosurgery, and aerospace medicine, he accepted the position as an emergency room director in a New Jersey hospital.

In the late 1970s he entered private practice in California and later wrote a popular series of articles on health care for the Bakersfield *Californian*. Other articles and comments of his have appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the *Bergen Record*, and *Private Practice*. While in practice he developed "Drop-in-Laboratory Services" to make access to medical care easier and less costly for the migrant workers that were most his patients.

Lured back to Italy by medieval castles and the opera at *La Scala* in 1984, Dr. Andrews worked ten years for the state health system. He was the first physician to join the then newly established Italian emergency hot line system.

After twenty-five years of medical practice on two continents, and with the regrettable certainty that patient care has taken a backseat to bureaucracy and to the questionable tactics of some of his colleagues both here and abroad, in 1995 he accepted a position with the United States Public Health Service and was a director of a Navajo clinic on their reservation in northeastern Arizona. He was also director of the clinic's Emergency Medical Services, and a director of the National Native American Emergency Medical Services Association.

Dr. Andrews is retired and passes his time writing, building model ships, and driving his modified Jeep and camper in the Arizona desert.

He has published Dr. Bascom's book, *How to Be a Patient and Live to Tell the Tale!* the third and final book of the *Medical Grail Trilogy*.